

SITES OF MEMORY: SOVIET MYTHS IN POST-SOVIET CULTURE

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Do we treat 1990s as a gap, a rupture between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present? Post-Soviet film and fiction certainly stage the break up of the Soviet Union and the end of Soviet rule in this way. Post-Soviet culture has left behind a certain set of Soviet cultural myths: the conquest of space, the normal functioning of Soviet life with clear sources of symbolic authority, the Soviet notion of heroism, etc. These myths have not been replaced with anything new. One can sense a real pause in films and texts from the late 80s and early 90s – as ideology, already exhausted by late socialism, takes a break. Eliot Borenstein speaks of the 1990s as a moment of a loss of national identity, of emasculation of Russian culture. Mikhail Epstein argues that the end of socialism created a loop in the time of national history, whereupon the Soviet future (communism) became the post-Soviet past. Aleksei Yurchak has shown that the utopian stability of the Soviet “forever” was lost in late socialism, staging a seemingly cataclysmic break up of the Soviet Union and its ideological constructs. My project seeks to uncover the sites that post-Soviet texts create in order to reflect on the Soviet narratives that came to an end, and on those that can be put in their place. What kinds of myths do post-Soviet texts rely on to construct a notion of continuity that overcomes what was previously discarded or destroyed? What myths are persistent enough to survive the historical gap?

I show that the texts from the 1990s already seek a path to re-mythologize the myths of the past. Their goal is to bridge the gap between the where Russia is now with where it had been. The project surveys the major players of the post-Soviet Russian cultural landscape, its most influential writers and filmmakers, to show that those same texts from the late 80s and 90s that seemingly spoke of the rupture, were always speaking about continuity. Svetlana Boym discusses the ways in which post-Communist nostalgia solidifies and stabilizes the mythological

space of Soviet culture, providing contemporary Russian culture with a workable past. With the imaginary worlds of Socialism gone upon the system's downfall, the Soviet past solidifies into the retroactively-produced Žižekian mythical object, the object produced by the loss itself. In this imaginary and imagined past, the two meanings of myth merge: it is a "myth" in a sense that it never existed, its illusory nature exposed by the collapse of Communist ideology and its post-Soviet deconstruction. Yet, it is also a "myth" in the Barthian sense, in a sense that the post-Soviet imagination inflects and expands the meanings attached to the signifiers of the Soviet state. The signs and symbols of the (Soviet) past are invested with other, new meanings, (re)constructed and used to structure and explain the country's present.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: THE WRITER, THE READER, THE CHARACTER: RE-MYTHOLOGIZING POST-SOVIET LITERARY SPACE	32
CHAPTER 2: NATIONAL PAST, LUBOK-STYLE: POST-SOVIET CINEMATIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE HISTORICAL PAST	93
CHAPTER 3: THE FUTURE-IN-THE-PAST: POST-SOVIET DYSTOPIA	134
CHAPTER 4: THE DEAD COSMONAUTS: SOVIET HERO IN POST-SOVIET SPACE	181
CONCLUSION.....	223
BIBLIOGRAPHY	229

INTRODUCTION

Situating Post-Soviet Culture

Можно было подумать, что это не живой человек, что он уже умер, или и не жил никогда, и ничего не видит в живом мире и не слышит ничего, кроме звенящих мертво слов.

Федор Сологуб, Мелкий Бес

You might conclude that he was not a living person, that he was already dead or had never lived, and that he saw nothing in the living world and heard nothing but dead-sounding words.

Fyodor Sologub, The Petty Demon

I.

The first chapter is omitted for the time being.

II.

The alarm clock rattled like a tin of bonbons. The alarm clock was cheap, painted, brown, of Soviet manufacture... The clock was accurate, but Margulies did not depend on it...

Margulies could not really have faith in so simple a mechanism as a timepiece; could not entrust to it so precious a thing as time¹.

In Valentin Kataev's 1932 novel, *Time, Forward!* (*Vremia, vpered!*), the Socialist industrial achievement defies time itself: the novel hurries past its first chapter, but its three hundred pages of highly metaphorical narration, clipped sentences and immense narrative time compression deal with just one day in the life of the builders of "Magnitka", The Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works in the Chelyabinsk region of the Soviet Union, an important event in the

¹ Valentine Kataev, *Time, Forward!*, trans. Charles Malamuth (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1995), 3.

history of Soviet industrialization. The plot develops around the motif of waiting: will the foremen allow the enthusiastic workers to beat the production record of the rival Kharkov concrete mixers? Will a pregnant woman be able to join the father of her baby on the production site? Will she be able to clean up his bachelor's pad by nightfall? Will the engineer's sister manage to get the notes from the engineer's former professor before noon? Will the production deadline be met?

The measured, structured time of the clock is a nuisance - a timepiece does not reflect the time of Socialism, hurriedly launching forward, towards its teleological goal. The sooner Communism comes, the better. Herein lies the paradox of Socialist Realist art: it exists, theoretically, in an ever-narrowing gap between the dark past and the bright Communist future that possesses an indelible sense of finality; yet the industrial novel, like Kataev's, records the gap itself by narrating the building of Communism, and continuously postponing the arrival of the future.

One is tempted, then, to read high Socialist Realist novel through Freud via Peter Brooks. Brooks, in his application of Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive to narrative dynamics, argues that the narrative desire, "[t]he desire of the text... is.... desire *for* the end, ... reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative."² In the larger scheme of Soviet cultural production, the Socialist Realist novel delays the coming of Communism by the very fact of its existence, its desire for the end of history in the form of the arrival of Communism counteracted by the circuitous narrative path it takes to bring Communism closer, taking its characters on sometimes extensively long journeys towards the heights of the Communist spirit.

² Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 104.

The temptation is even stronger in retrospect: the tension of delaying the end of the narrative is metaphorized as sexual tension in Vladimir Sorokin's 1982 short novel, *Marina's Thirtieth Love*. The distinctly apolitical, neurotic and shrewd female protagonist spends the whole novel exploring her sexuality, a taboo subject for Soviet prose, only to disappear in the stylistically faithful recreation of a high Socialist Realist novel after a particularly powerful orgasm (complete with a chorus singing the Soviet national anthem). After the narrative break, the sophisticated protagonist is no more; having lost her name (she now goes by her surname, in a nod to the Socialist novel's stylistic preference), she goes to work in a factory and spends the last pages of the novel struggling to increase productivity amidst her roommates' discussions on the most effective ways to contribute personally to the building of Communism. The novel closes with the complete dissolution of the subjective narrative perspective, as the suddenly emergent omniscient narrator proclaims that the "fruits of [the characters'] creativity" would serve the "further increase in the economic and defensive power of the Socialist Fatherland, as well as the rise in the prosperity of the Soviet people,"³ in the exact same language as the Soviet newspaper formula would have it.

Intuitively, we may read Sorokin's take on Socialist Realist literature as a purely parodic one. The power seems to have gone from Soviet textuality as it becomes meaningless, formulaic, agency-erasing in the closing pages of *Marina*. The beginning of the end was the year 1956, the year of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Union, which exposed Stalin's personality cult, signifying a large symbolic shift at work in subsequent Soviet cultural production. The figure of Stalin that seemed to hold Soviet narratives together, always their

³ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. "Пусть же плоды их дерзаний и творчества лучше служат дальнейшему повышению экономического и оборонного могущества социалистического Отечества, росту благосостояния советских людей" (Vladimir Sorokin, *Tridsataia Lyubov' Mariny* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo R. Elinina, 1995), 277)

implicit referent and addressee, “the master who... by being presented as standing outside ideological discourse and possessing an external knowledge of the objective truth, temporarily conceals the contradiction by allowing it to ‘appear through himself’”⁴, no longer legitimized the production of Soviet textuality. In Lacanian terms, Stalin is the Soviet version of the Name-of-the-Father; for Jacques Lacan, the Name-of-the-Father is the fundamental signifier that launches the process of signification and thus identification:

The function of symbolic identification... [the paternal function] concentrates in itself both imaginary and real relations that always more or less fail to correspond to the symbolic relation that essentially constitutes it. It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of law⁵.

Especially in view of Russian culture’s propensity for “upholding the leader as the father of the nation,”⁶ the revelations of the 20th Party Congress may be read as having launched the definitive disintegration of the Soviet Name-of-the-Father, facilitating the creation of a glaring absence in the symbolic structure underlying the way in which the Soviet state imagined itself. The role of Stalin as the master signifier of Soviet culture becomes evident in retrospect, after his personality cult is exposed; there is little doubt that, for post-Stalinist Soviet culture, Stalin becomes more than *just* a major historical figure. The figure of Stalin acquires a paradoxical duplicity in the later Soviet culture: on the one hand, post-Stalinist narratives forever lose their universal referent, no longer legitimized by the paternal metaphor; on the other, scholarship on

⁴ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 10.

⁵ Jacques Lacan. “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 230.

⁶ Yana Hashamova, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film* (Bristol/Chicago, Intellect, 2007), 116.

late-Soviet culture notes that this metaphor expands⁷ to become *the* signifier of the Soviet era across a range of cultural texts. Even as the Soviet state continued to exist after the end of Stalinism, Stalin's ghost continued to appear on screen and on page as the symbol of the cultural legacy of Socialism in the 1980s, still as important a staple of cinematic narratives as it used to be in Stalinist cinema⁸. In this way, the Soviet state itself emerges in post-Stalinist Soviet culture as a retrospective construction, as a structure of cultural memory solidified by the figure of Stalin.

Lacan posits that the lack of the Name-of-the-Father opens up a hole in the signified, "set[ting] off a cascade of reworkings of the signifier from which the growing disaster of the imaginary proceeds, until the level is reached at which signifier and signified stabilize in a delusional metaphor."⁹ Indeed, this may be an interpretative lens through which to read Vladimir Sorokin's take on Soviet textuality: no longer sustained by the cult of Stalin, by one single legitimizing metaphor, the slogans and clichés of Soviet discourse become a parodic cascade of empty signs in the final pages of *Marina's Thirtieth Love*.

The post-Stalin history of Soviet Union has been read in precisely this way, as a gradual crumbling of the Soviet narratives. Alexei Yurchak proposes a linguistic reason for the collapse of the grand narrative of the Soviet state, as he explores the paradoxical situation in which Soviet culture of the 1970s-1980s found itself. The paradox, according to Yurchak, was that the seeming eternity of the Soviet system was very quickly replaced by the feeling of the inevitability of its collapse. Yurchak sees the reasons for this paradox in the production and

⁷ See Derek Spring, "Stalinism: The Historical Debate", in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (NY: Routledge, 1993), 1-14.

⁸ Julian Graffy, "Unshelving Stalin: after the period of stagnation", in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (NY: Routledge, 1993), 212-227; Svetlana Boym, "Stalin is with us: Soviet documentary mythologies of the 1980s", in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (NY: Routledge, 1993), 201-212; and Anna Lawton, "The Ghost That Does Return: Exorcising Stalin", in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (NY: Routledge, 1993), 186-200.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Treatment of Psychosis", in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 445-489, 481.

reproduction of authoritative discourse that eliminated the constative element of the language—in other words, the ability of signifiers to be unquestionably and “naturally” attached to their signifieds. The radical break between the signifier and the signified, according to Yurchak, stemmed from the endless repetition of authoritative discourse that had little to no relation to the current social reality. This had drastic consequences for the production of subjectivity, as the subjects of the state were bound to view state-controlled discourse as a “pure performance.” The fall of the Soviet system, then, can be ascribed to the loss of its master signifier¹⁰.

Was, then, the power of Socialist textuality definitively exhausted by the late 1980s? At the first glance, this indeed seems to be the case if we look at conceptualist art and *sots-art* in the late 1970s and 80s; *sots-art*, in particular, asks for an intuitive reading as a straightforward cultural reaction to the clichés of Soviet textuality and visuality, as it faithfully recreates these only to rearrange them in order to create unorthodox meanings. When *sots-art* creators Vitaly Komar and Aleksander Melamid were expelled from the Youth Division of the Artists' Union for “distortion of Soviet reality,” this reality was crumbling on its own: in the 1966 painting *Flowers for the Teacher*, an eerie green glow envelops the standard subject of Socialist Realist painting, its formulaic composition lovingly preserved. The faceless girl giving a bouquet to the equally faceless teacher in the painting may indeed be read as the distortion of Soviet reality. However, it is precisely the faithful recreation of the Socialist Realist formula that brings scholars like Boris Groys to read what looks to be a symptom of the system’s exhaustion to mean a paradoxical re-launching of the mythologies of Socialist Realism. In his *Total Art of Stalinism*, Groys notes Socialist Realism’s exceptional conduciveness for mythologizing not just the objects of art, but aesthetic practices themselves. He argues that, through reproduction of Soviet images, *sots-art*

¹⁰ See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 21-26.

returns to the utopian meanings attached to the Soviet symbolic system and especially to the symbols of Stalinist culture. It does so in order to deconstruct Soviet utopianism while simultaneously inscribing it into a universal paradigm of cultural mythologies. “The devices of Stalinist indoctrination”, Groys argues, “were [used to demonstrate] the similarity of this myth to those of both the present and the past to reconstruct the single mythological network in which the modern consciousness functions.”¹¹

It is this restorative aspect inherent in what looks to be an irreverent parody of Soviet authoritative textuality that makes possible another reading of the ending of Sorokin’s *Marina’s Thirtieth Love*: while the protagonists of Socialist Realist novels spend their respective narratives waiting for the Socialist future to come, Marina’s own narrative path, however unorthodox, leads her exactly to where the Socialist novel would want her to be - towards a narrative future that is an endless celebration of the Socialist state as the individual disappears in the endless repetition of the state’s discourse.

Wherein lies the appeal of Soviet textuality for the later Soviet and post-Soviet cultures? After all, the fall of the Soviet Union, an outcome of the gradual crumbling of Soviet narratives, has been popularly read as the radical break with the Soviet past. Communist ideology seemingly completely discredited and outright negated by the emergent post-Soviet state, the 1990s looked like a time of radical transition; the end of the Soviet state produced a range of anxieties about national identity and national history as post-Soviet Russian culture attempted to craft a new identity for itself¹².

¹¹ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 95.

¹² See, e.g., Horton, Andrew, Michael Brashinsky, eds. *The Zero Hour : Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992); Birgit Beumers, “To Moscow! To Moscow? The Russian Hero and the Loss of the Centre”, in *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 76-91; Susan Larsen, “National Identity, Cultural Authority and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov”, in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn 2003), 491-511; Nina Tsyrukun,

Do we then treat the 1990s as a gap, a rupture between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present? In Yurchak's argument, the utopian stability of the Soviet "forever" was lost in late socialism, setting the stage for a seemingly cataclysmic breakup of the Soviet Union and its ideological constructs. Films like Karen Shakhnazarov's *City Zero*, as well as texts like Viktor Pelevin's *Omon Ra*, certainly stage the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of Soviet rule in this way. Both texts end on an ambivalent note; the protagonists of each are traveling (in *City Zero*, in a small boat with no oars; in *Omon Ra*, on the Red Line of the Moscow metro) but their destination is unknown. They have left behind a certain set of Soviet cultural myths: the conquest of outer space, the normal functioning of Soviet life with clear sources of symbolic authority, the Soviet notion of heroism. These myths have not been replaced with new myths. One can sense a pause in films and texts from the late 1980s and early 1990s as ideology, already exhausted by late socialism, takes a break.

On the textual level, this break is staged as the manipulation of the peculiar narrative temporality characteristic of Socialist Realist texts. As we have seen, this temporality is not measured by the time of the clock. Katerina Clark, reading the Soviet novel's peculiar temporality through the Bakhtinian notion of the chronotope¹³, suggests that the futuristic modality of the Soviet novel creates a tension between the mimetic "what is" and the completed, immutable perfect world of "what should be."¹⁴ Clark traces the parallels between this perfect, "incontrovertible" reality that the Soviet novel constructs, and the time-value system of the

"Tinkling Symbols: Fragmented Society – Fragmented Cinema?", in *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*. Ed. Birgit Beumers (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 57-66; Adele Barker, ed. *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999); Berdahl, Daphne et. al., eds. *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics", in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-258, 84.

¹⁴ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (U of Chicago Press, 1981), 40.

Bakhtinian notion of the epic which, Bakhtin says, tells of a mythic time separated from the present by the unbridgeable gap of the “absolute epic past”. Clark argues that the Soviet novel picks up on the sacred, closed time of the epic, making it into the mythic Great Time of the Soviet novel, set to “annul time, to write off ... the unbridgeable distance between... [the Bakhtinian] absolute epic past and the present”¹⁵, “subordinat[ing] [the] historical reality to the preexisting patterns of legend... [and] bridg[ing] the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought to be.’”¹⁶

The paradox of the Socialist Realist novel, then, is that it creates the temporal gap that it is meant to cover over, behaving as if it is simultaneously set in the present and in the future, going forward and not going anywhere. Without the authority of the paternal metaphor that could legitimize the temporal paradox, in late-Soviet prose, the absolute time of Socialist Realism is either “accelerate[d]”, or “slow[ed] down”, whereby “the retardation of absolute time” is performed by creating “the absolute pause, silence, and the void (i.e., anti-time) [which for these texts] are the ideal states.”¹⁷

It is this pause that the late-Soviet and early post-Soviet texts stage as they deconstruct and reflect upon Soviet ideology, crafting de-ideologized textual sites where the time of national history is suspended. The time of national history becomes, in the texts like Tatyana Tolstaya’s novel *The Slynx*, or Aleksandr Sokurov’s film *Russian Arc*, an unmoving, floating, suspended temporality. Trauma theory provides an avenue through which to read this temporal suspension: a traumatic event creates a breach in the conventional temporal structure as accessible to the subject. The subject is therefore stripped of that temporal frame of reference which ensures

¹⁵ Clark 40.

¹⁶ Clark 41.

¹⁷ As discussed in Marina Balina, “Playing Absolute Time: Chronotypes of Sots-Art”, in *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 2000), 58-76, 60.

integrity of identity, making the subject functional¹⁸. On a national scale, a rupture in time occurs when major historical changes affect the state institutions and thus challenge the linear nature of their shared national narratives.

In this way, texts from the late 1980s and early 1990s that feature temporal suspension, such as *City Zero*, *Omon Ra*, *The Slynx*¹⁹ and others, suggest that late-Soviet Russia becomes a site of trauma. After the fall of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet culture exhibits more traumatic symptoms: scholars like Birgit Beumers, Yana Hashamova, Susan Larsen, and others²⁰ have delineated the ways in which national space becomes fragmented, unstable, and unmappable in post-Soviet texts. One reason for this fragmentation is found in social and cultural processes characteristic of the transitional period of contemporary Russian history, which presents a set of challenges not just to the imaginary integrity of national identity, but also to the aesthetic principles informing cultural production, as the aesthetic framework of Socialist Realism and its mythmaking potential is challenged and exposed in the post-Soviet context. Anglo-American cultural studies and literary criticism, informed by neo-Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and trauma theory, treat the cultural processes in post-Soviet Russia as a reaction to a symbolic collapse. Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, Beumers, Nancy Condee, and others²¹ cite the “symptomatic” disintegration of the grand narratives of the nation, nostalgia for the Communist past, fragmentation of space, and displacement as primary trends of the post-Soviet cultural production.

¹⁸ For the discussion of traumatic breach of temporality, see Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Jenny Edkins (see Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. xiii, xiv, also 13-14), extrapolates the theory into the social sphere.

¹⁹ Though *The Slynx* was published in 1999, Tolstaia began to write it in the late 1980s.

²⁰ See: Beumers 1999; Yana Hashamova 2007; Larsen 2003.

²¹ See Horton and Brashinsky, 1992; Nancy Condee, ed., *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-century Russia* (London/Bloomington: BFI/Indiana University Press, 1995); Tsyrukun 1999, 57-66; Aleksandr Ageev, “Conspectus of the crisis: Sociocultural Conditions and the Literary Process”, in *Re-Entering the Sign: Articulating New Russian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 170-189.

For domestic criticism and Russian émigré scholars, on the other hand, the fragmentation of grand narratives and the disintegration of national space are not precisely the symptoms of the collapse of national identity; instead, for scholars like Mikhail Epstein, Sergei Dobrotvorsky and Mikhail Iampolsky²², they signal the advent of postmodernism as a dominant aesthetic principle of post-Soviet art. Indeed, if one faced the task of characterizing post-Soviet textuality succinctly, one of its most salient features would be the experimentation with language, narrative and genre conventions, which Andrew Wachtel ascribes to the cultural necessity of finding a new language with which to articulate the rapidly changing social reality²³.

The search for this protean post-Soviet language is complemented by the manifest reliance of post-Soviet textuality on other textualities: diachronically, the phenomenon is evidenced by the staggering amount of intertextual references to the Russian/Soviet continuum of literary tradition, as scholars like Lyudmila Parts²⁴ show; synchronically, post-Soviet referentiality manifests in borrowing textual and cinematic tropes from global popular culture, most importantly from Hollywood entertainment cinema, with writers like Viktor Pelevin making global cultural icons like Arnold Schwarzenegger into characters of his novels. This set of phenomena contributes to the leveling of the divide between “high” and “low” culture, the

²² Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Critical Perspectives on Modern Culture), trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Sergei Dobrotvorsky, “Cinema Myths and the Future of Culture”, in *Re-Entering the Sign: Articulating New Russian Culture*. Ed. Ellen E. Berry and Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1995), 311-324. Mikhail Iampolsky, “Death in Cinema” in *Re-Entering the Sign: Articulating New Russian Culture*. Ed. Ellen E. Berry and Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1995), 270-289.

²³ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2006), esp. 217.

²⁴ Lyudmila Parts, *The Chekhovian Intertext: Dialogue with a Classic*. 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008).

divide that, in the Russian cultural tradition, used to be sharply pronounced, thus strengthening the Jamesonian arguments in favor of a postmodern(ist) nature of post-Soviet culture²⁵.

These features of the post-Soviet Russian cultural landscape prompted theorizations of post-Soviet culture as a hybrid culture²⁶ as it clings to the Soviet legacy while infusing it with the now-available Western cultural paradigms.

Yet, post-Soviet intertextuality is far from being unproblematically postmodernist – Linda Hutcheon’s playfulness of postmodernist referentiality²⁷ is often lost, subsumed by the sheer amount of referentiality that films like the Aleinikov brothers’ 1992 *Tractor Drivers II*, or novels like Viktor Pelevin’s *Chapaiev i pustota* (*Clay Machine-Gun*, alternatively *Chapayev and the Void*) exhibit, referencing Hollywood and Stalinist cinema, Eastern philosophy and the Russian modernist novel with equal, and overwhelming, sophistication. More than simply the postmodern notion of all signifiers being equal in value and thus carrying no value at all, the sheer violence of appropriative tactics of some of these post-Soviet texts brings me to argue that the post-Soviet referentiality is actually – paradoxically - a quest for meaning. These texts poach (to borrow language from Michel De Certeau²⁸) other textualities for meaningful language.

After the breakup of Soviet Union, the fantasy of clear cultural meanings no longer sustains the now-post-Soviet textuality; cultural meanings reveal their *constructedness*, their

²⁵Fredric Jameson stresses the leveling of the divide between the “high” and “low” culture in postmodernity, citing postmodern art’s fascination with “this whole ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest culture, of advertising and motels... materials they no longer simply “quote”, ... but incorporate into their very substance”: Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 3-4.

²⁶Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel, eds. *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective* (Arbeiten und Texte zur Slavistik 78. Munich: Sagner. 2005), 32; Liliia Shevtsova, trans. Mark Eckert, “Russia’s Hybrid Regime”, in *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 12, Number 4, October 2001), 65-70.

²⁷Hutcheon cites the works of Joseph Heller, Robert Coover and Kurt Vonnegut as examples of postmodernist playfulness. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* (NY: Routledge, 1988), esp. 141-157.

²⁸Michel De Certeau, “Reading as poaching”, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 165-176, esp. 171,174.

dependence on cultural and textual codes illuminated by the breakdown of these codes. Julia Kristeva, building on Bakhtin's discussion of literary dialogism and heteroglossia, speaks of a critical interpretative moment when the "notion of intertextuality replaces the notion of intersubjectivity."²⁹ In a perverse reading, the swarm of linguistic and cultural codes that are used (and abused) by early post-Soviet films like *Tractor Drivers II*, in an endless stream of references meant to articulate post-Soviet identity, comes to stand in for the post-Soviet subject, masking a lack in post-Soviet subjectivity. In *Tractor Drivers II*, an avant-garde remake of Ivan Pyr'iev's 1939 classic, *Tractor Drivers*, the protagonist attempts to use the language staged for him by high Stalinist culture in the early post-Soviet milieu; yet, he is compelled to drop the Stalinist formulae and resort to screaming and bizarre behavior, thus signifying the failure of this language to articulate the post-Soviet reality.

It is this impossibility of grasping and articulating the meaning of signifiers that brings scholars like Serguei Oushakine to deem post-Soviet culture aphasic. Oushakine argues that, in the post-Soviet context, the economic and cultural uncertainties, accompanied by a loss of the frame of reference that allows the subject to discuss current sociopolitical reality, the loss of a "metalanguage," lead to a loss of the ability to understand what the very metaphor of "post-Soviet" stands for³⁰.

How does one read post-Soviet culture, then? Is it hybrid, aphasic, postmodern, traumatic? Where does it "transition?" Was the Communist future simply replaced in Russian teleology by the not-less-utopian capitalist dream of the market economy shaped by Western cultural values? Why is it that in the same late-Soviet *City Zero*, as well as in early post-Soviet

²⁹Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

³⁰ Serguei Oushakine, "In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 6 (2000): 991-1016.

films like Ivan Dykhovichnyi's 1992 *Moscow Parade*, Soviet myths persist despite the deconstruction of Soviet ideology? In the late 1980s, *City Zero* makes use of the artistic freedoms associated with the era of *glasnost* to stage the still-existing Soviet state as a place with no sense of temporal progression. The film's suspended temporality satirizes and exposes the textual "eternal present," a temporality characteristic of Socialist Realist art where the passage of time does not bring about change. Yet, by satirizing this temporality the film magnifies the time of the Socialist Realist text, preserving it in its own cinematic space. The film already looks at Soviet history from a critical interpretative distance, thus contributing to the staging of a historical break between Soviet and what is yet-to-become post-Soviet history. History becomes, in the film, a museum, in which the events of Soviet, Russian, and world history are grotesquely distorted and at times plainly invented; yet, Soviet history is preserved in the underground memory vault, and the film's appeal to the aesthetics of high Stalinism creates a perverse continuity between the Soviet and the post-Soviet representations of history.

Moscow Parade, in its turn, exemplifies a distinctly uneasy treatment of the totalitarian legacy in the post-Soviet context: while on the surface critical of Stalinism's inhumanity, its stifling of creativity and of freedom of expression, the film nonetheless dwells on the celebratory aesthetics of Stalinism and lovingly constructs a fantasy of festive everyday life in a manner very similar to totalitarian art. Problematizing the direction of post-Soviet cultural "transition," post-Soviet films look back not just to the events of Russian/Soviet history. Other films, like Aleksei Fedorchenko's *First on the Moon* and Nikita Mikhalkov's *The Barber of Siberia*, demonstrate that Soviet myths about the role of art inform post-Soviet aesthetic paradigms with increasing insistence.

In particular, *First on the Moon*, a mockumentary, crafts a practice of writing Soviet history that implicitly dwells on the Soviet model. “Mockumentary”, a genre defined as “a partial and concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional subject,”³¹ uses representational techniques conventionally associated with “telling the truth” for dealing with fictional subjects. As Aleksandr Prokhorov argues, late-Soviet and post-Soviet cinema “dealt with the gap between Soviet reality and its representations in Soviet culture”³². Mockumentary, then, becomes a productive genre for a culture in which “the association between factual discourse and factual means of representation is increasingly tenuous”³³. In the post-Soviet cultural context, permeated with the remnants of Soviet signifiers that have proved to be empty, mockumentary’s representational mode, paradoxically, can potentially become a functional model of working through the past, because it ironically yet compulsively uses the same techniques of fictionalizing social reality that were used in creating the Soviet master narrative in the first place. In other words, the mockumentary’s mode of treating the “reality” of the event is very similar to the mode in which the Soviet official discourse is perceived, in the post-Soviet context, to have treated Soviet social reality. Mourning this lost modality of representation, *First on the Moon*, on one level, examines the creation of the Soviet myth of the conquest of space. On another level, through the very fact of this examination, it conceptually solidifies it, by consciously narrating it *as a myth*. This enables the film to find a “proper place” for this important part of the Soviet grand narrative in the post-Soviet context.

³¹ Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight. *Faking it. Mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001, 2, quoted in Aleksandr Prokhorov, “The Redemption of Lunar Reality: Aleksei Fedorchenko’s *First on the Moon* (Pervye na lune)”, 2005. Kino-Kultura 2006, no 11. <<http://www.kinokultura.com/2006/11r-firstmoon2.shtml>>, accessed May 29, 2009.

³² Prokhorov 2006.

³³ Roscoe and Hight 3, quoted in Prokhorov 2006.

By the end of the 1990s, it becomes even more evident that the traumatic historical gap of the end of Socialism is countered by the desire for historical continuity. Mikhalkov's *The Barber of Siberia*, a late 1990s film, tries to re-assimilate (if not fully rehabilitate) the Russian past, conceived now in the broadest possible terms that include Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. The film's goal is to bridge the gap between where Russia is now with where it had been. In the film, for the duration of the cinematic illusion at least, the overconstructed space of Tsarist Russia becomes a site where the emergent nationalist ideological fantasies can be played out. I examine the emergence of the utopianized cinematic version of the Russian national past in the course of the 1990s in Chapter 2. Reading three films from the late 1980s through the late 1990s, I argue that Russian film resurrects the national past from its status as an uncertain category of memory (which it became in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse) and assigns it another status, that of the imaginary repository of cultural mythologies. In these films, the national past becomes a cache of symbols that sustain the fantasy of a unified Russian national identity, however problematic some of these symbols may have become. Post-1991 Russian culture, then, at least partly "transitions" towards the past. Does the "reverse" direction of this transition signify a cultural compulsion to repeat history?

Soviet culture constantly postponed the arrival of the future, and, as Mikhail Epstein explains, as this postponement came to an abrupt end in 1991, the future and the past exchanged places in the schema of Russian national history. In *After the Future*, Epstein argues that the fall of the Soviet Union signified a major shift in the ways Russian culture conceived of national history and historical temporality in general. He describes a "loop" that the time of Russian national history makes in the aftermath of 1991, whereupon the Communist future, one of the organizing temporal categories of the Soviet grand narrative, suddenly becomes the post-Soviet

past³⁴. “For the Russian consciousness”, Epstein suggests, “the collapse of communism was not simply the end, but rather an inversion of the beginning and the end, an almost impossible anomaly of time. [...] The historical perspective, once so confidently described by Marxism, has been turned inside out.”³⁵ For Epstein, the dissolution of the Communist teleological model of history that coexists with nostalgic memories of a time when this model was functional, becomes one of the definitive conceptual mechanisms at work in post-Soviet cultural production. The memory of a relatively stable past, coinciding with an impossibility of a comparably stable future, launches cultural mechanisms meant to restore the relative stability of the temporal structure of history.

The post-Soviet take on the communist teleology, simultaneously deconstructive and nostalgic, finds expression in the post-Soviet dystopian novel that I examine in Chapter 3. There, I argue that the post-apocalyptic and/or totalitarian landscapes of the future that emerge in these texts are simultaneously in opposition to and in dialogue with Soviet literature’s cheerful utopianism. The post-apocalyptic landscape becomes a site where the national past is questioned by way of displacement and traumatic repetition. Tolstaya’s novel, *The Slynx*, re-imagines a future that fully repeats the mechanisms of the past, paving the way for another such repetition, staged in Vladimir Sorokin’s *A Day of Oprichnik*. Yet, I show that a utopian dimension opens up in these dystopian milieus, as, in an unusual move for the genre, the protagonists feel “at home” in these dystopias. The novels project this feeling of “belonging” to a dystopian society onto the reader. This enables post-Soviet dystopias to metaphorize the tension between the parts of the Soviet legacy, creating a textual space where Soviet totalitarianism can coexist with the nostalgic reconstruction of the Soviet utopian fantasies.

³⁴See Epstein 1995.

³⁵ See Mikhail Epstein, “Postmodernism, Communism and Sots-Art”, in *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 3-31,20.

Post-Communist nostalgia, as theorized by Svetlana Boym³⁶, manifests itself in the appeal that Soviet myths, seemingly completely discredited after the fall of the Soviet Union, carry in the post-Soviet context. As much as the removal of Feliks Dzerzhinskii's statue from the Lubyanskaia Square in Moscow in 1991 might suggest a radical break with the Soviet past, the ghost of Vladimir Lenin continues to resist exorcising as Lenin's body, enshrined in the Mausoleum, continues to define the landscape of the new Russian statehood.

Boym argues that sharing the memories of the past, on which principle communities are united, requires representation of the past as a continuous narrative³⁷. In the post-Soviet case, the Soviet narrative of the eventual triumph of Communism (or at least the myth that the Soviet experience was nobler, more superior and beneficial for humankind than its Western counterpart) served as this uniting narrative. Boym conceptualizes nostalgia as primarily a longing for the imaginary, idealized place that contains memories of the past³⁸. The past itself, by extension, is reconceptualized as a place, as something akin to a treasured memory vault. However, neither the past as it is presented in nostalgic narratives, nor the actual places to which the memories are relegated, ever "really" existed³⁹. They exist, instead, on screen and on page, where the nostalgic fantasy materializes as a textual and/or cinematic illusion.

According to Boym, nostalgia comes to be mediated through a kind of cultural fetishism, that is, the remnants of the past (artifacts, images, and condensed symbols of the nation) serve at

³⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

³⁷ See Introduction, Boym 2001, esp. xiii.

³⁸ See Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1994), 4, also 283-287.

³⁹ To illustrate the point, one can think back to a very well-known post-Communist nostalgic text, Wolfgang Becker's 2003 film, *Good-Bye Lenin*, where the East German cultural milieu that the protagonist attempts to restore for his sick mother is hyperreal and highly stylized, not only because of the memory's faultiness but also precisely because of the amount of restorative work that goes into recreating it.

the same time as triggers of and the ways to cope with nostalgia⁴⁰. “I had a mirrored buffet. And a colored TV with an Italian tube... My brother-in-law managed to get a hold of a Yugoslav cabinet set, I had a separate bathroom and toilet, Golden Autumn wallpaper”⁴¹, says one of the characters of Tolstaia’s post-apocalyptic *The Slynx*, in which a nuclear blast serves as a metaphor for the fall of the Soviet Union. The past condenses, for this character, into artifacts associated with well-to-do Soviet urban living.

Why is post-Soviet nostalgia so pervasive? Why do events of Soviet history and Soviet symbols continue to hold the post-Soviet imagination of the 1990s? Susan Buck-Morss’s reading of Soviet utopian ideology proposes a reason for the post-Soviet nostalgia for the past. The fall of the Soviet Union, Buck-Morss elaborates, constituted a loss of the ideological illusion. Buck-Morss makes use of Walter Benjamin’s analytical concept of “the dreamworld,” central to his theory of modernity as the reenchantment of the world, in her analysis of the cultures of both capitalism and socialism as utopian dreams of industrial modernity’s capability to provide happiness for the masses⁴². In Buck-Morss’s argument, the fall of the Soviet Union marked a definitive breakdown of this dream, the breakdown of the Soviet mythological imagination⁴³, which used to be sustained by networks of ideologically charged psychosocial fantasies through which the subjects organize their experiences, by the networks of utopian cultural myths.

⁴⁰ I am borrowing the lucky term of cultural fetishism from the discussion of nostalgia manifested in post-Soviet Russian culture of advertising by Jeremy Morris (Jeremy Morris, “The Empire Strikes Back: Projections of National Identity in Contemporary Russian Advertising”, in *The Russian Review*, Vol. 64, Issue 4, 642-660).

⁴¹ Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, trans. Jamey Gambrell. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 148.

⁴² Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge-London, MIT Press, 2002), 205.

⁴³ See, e.g., Carol Barner-Barry and Cynthia Hody, “Soviet Marxism-Leninism as Mythology”, in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), 609-630.

Concealing their origins in ideology (to borrow the phrase from Louis Althusser)⁴⁴, these myths were staged as concrete mythical narratives in the texts of Socialist Realism.

Socialist Realism, the Soviet aesthetic doctrine, Evgeny Dobrenko shows⁴⁵, was predicated on the transformational nature of aesthetic activity; the famous goal of depicting life not as it is, but as it should be, proclaimed at the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers of 1934, aporetically wedded the mimetic principles of realist representation to the Marxist mythopoesis⁴⁶.

A brief look at the textual strategies of the Soviet novel elucidates the reasons why this particular type of textuality is especially conducive for covering gaps in meaning and for mediating mythic content. Here is a passage from Aleksandr Fadeev's *The Young Guard* (*Molodaia Gvardiia*, 1943-1951):

In those early years he had distinguished himself as a staunch and able soldier. But he was promoted not only for that: staunchness and ability are not rare qualities.

Unassumingly, little by little, even slowly as it appeared, he had assimilated everything a Red Army soldier could learn from the company political instructors and the battalion and regimental political commissars – that countless, nameless army of workers from political departments and Red Army Party groups, and may the memory of these people live on down the ages. He did not simply learn their science; he chewed it over and made

⁴⁴ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. (Monthly Review Press, 1971), 121-176:153.

⁴⁵ See Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*. 1st ed. (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1997), 17

⁴⁶ Boris Groys proposes in his *The Total Art of Stalinism* that the "Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by the means of a total aesthetico-political project" (see Groys 1992, 36); Also see: Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*. Trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1992).

it an integral part of himself. Then all at once he stood out among his fellows as a man with exceptional political gifts⁴⁷.

The otherwise brilliant translation does not do justice to the strategy of epic retardation that this classic Soviet novel continuously employs. Alluding to one of Stalin's favorite rhetorical strategies, pleonastic restatement⁴⁸, the original passage repeats "he rose from the ranks" (*on vydvynulsia*) four times as it narrates the story of a Party official who would play an important role coordinating the Donbass anti-Fascist resistance during the Great Patriotic War. The passage is illustrative of the Soviet novel's epic strategies, even featuring a concealed invocation of the Party, the muse of the Soviet epic. Such literary environment was, as Katerina Clark has shown, especially conducive for the Soviet novel's major function, which "since at least 1932-34... has been to serve as the official repository of state myths"⁴⁹.

Regine Robin calls Socialist Realism an "impossible aesthetic"⁵⁰, and indeed, larger-than-life epic heroes of high Stalinism merged within this aesthetic with stock characters representing "social types", like the sublime, yet nameless army of the political workers in Fadeev's novel. Soviet formulaic mythical narratives and their origin in the foundational myths of Russian culture have been extensively outlined by scholars like Robin, Clark, Groys, Mark Lipovetsky⁵¹ and others. Yet, this study aims to show that this aesthetic continues to hold a mythopoetic

⁴⁷ Aleksandr Fadeev, *The Young Guard*, trans. Violet Dutt (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959?), 39. "В те юные годы он выдвинулся как стойкий боец. Он выдвинулся как умный боец. Но он выдвинулся не только поэтому: стойкие и умные люди не редкость в народе. Исподволь, незаметно, казалось бы даже медленно, усваивал он все то, чему учили бойцов-красноармейцев ротные политруки, батальонные и полковые комиссары - вся бесчисленная, безыменная армия работников политотделов и воинских партийных ячеек, да живет во веки веков память об этих людях! И он не просто усваивал их науку - он перерабатывал и прочно укладывал ее в своей душе. И вдруг выдвинулся среди боевых товарищей своих как человек незаурядного политического дарования" (Aleksandr Fadeiev, *Molodaia Gvardiia* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoie Pedagogicheskoe izdatel'stvo ministerstva prosveshcheniia RSFSR, 1959), 39).

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Iosif Stalin, "Golovokruzheniie ot uspekhev", in *Pravda*, no. 60 (2 March 1930), for a concise classic example of Stalin's epic rhetorical strategies.

⁴⁹ Clark xii.

⁵⁰ See Robin 1992, esp. Part 1.

⁵¹ Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue With Chaos* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

temptation for the post-Soviet culture even after Soviet novel, clichéd and conventionally “unreadable,”⁵² was exposed as a cache of empty Party slogans and meanings.

This mythopoetic potential is a function of the meta-literary implications of the Socialist Realist aesthetic and its inherent aporetic duplicity noted above. In Groys’s reading, Socialist Realism, with its transformational goals, is inherently an avant-garde aesthetic; yet, formally it is, first and foremost, a restorative project, a historical project to inscribe the history of proletarian art into the general teleological schema of Marxist history. Clark argues that “the only thing that was absolutely new about Socialist Realism was the term itself”⁵³. Indeed, Lenin’s pronouncement about the “proletarian culture not [having] sprung out of nowhere... [being] a logical development of the store of knowledge that the mankind had accumulated under the yoke of the capitalist society”⁵⁴ determined, on the level of state philosophy, the inherent reliance of Socialist Realism on cultural and aesthetic continuity. Formally, Socialist Realism was a return to the principles of realist representation that Russian modernist and post-Revolutionary avant-garde seemingly had done away with. Indeed, the very foundational document of Socialist Realism, the Central Committee’s 1932 Decree that established Socialist Realism as an official state art, is called “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations.” In the original Russian, the Decree uses the word “*perestroika*”. It is too tempting to pass on an opportunity for an analogy: the Socialist Realist “return” to the principles of realist representation was meant to undo the harms of uncontrolled and uncontrollable, runaway avant-garde textuality as much as Mikhail Gorbachev’s (failed) late-Soviet policy of

⁵² Clark ix.

⁵³ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Lenin, “Zadachi Soiuzov Molodezhi: Rech na III Vserossiiskom s’ezde RKSM 20 oktyabria 1920 goda”, in Vladimir Lenin. *Polnoie Sobranie Sochinenii*, Vol 41, (Moskva: Politizdat, 1967-81), 304-305, 304.

“Пролетарская культура должна явиться закономерным развитием тех запасов знания, которые человечество выработало под гнетом капиталистического общества”.

perestroika. That policy, with its appeal to bring Soviet official discourse close to social reality, was meant to restore meaning to the official discourse—meaning that, by the 1980s, was slipping through the cracks, no longer held together by the organizing metaphors of the Soviet state.

We can draw a parallel between the post-Soviet treatment of Socialist Realism and the Socialist Realist treatment of the classic Russian literature of the 19th century, conventionally labeled the Golden Age of Russian literature. Beginning with the creation of modern Russian literary language, the history of Russian literature in the 19th century can be read as a story of molding and tempering the principles of realist representation, as social and psychological realism of the great 19th century Russian novelists becomes, in the course of the century, so sophisticated that it eventually crumbles under its own weight, signaling the end of an era. However, this history can also be read as a story of solidifying the myth of the power of literary textuality. The Romantic notion of the “poet-prophet” explored by the first two major poets of modern Russian literature, Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, carries over to the early Russian literary criticism that perversely interpreted the realist mimesis as the quest for truth. Literary critic Vissarion Belinskii was instrumental in installing [national] literature as a source of profound cultural meanings, assigning it a nearly magical power to influence the reader. It is this power that Socialist Realism appropriated, covering the gap of modernist semantic uncertainty created by the revolutionary art.

Of course, the smooth, seamless, authoritative Russian textuality of the Golden Age, just as the Golden Age itself, is a retroactive construct, a cultural myth largely solidified by the prescriptive Soviet literary criticism, as Dobrenko shows. Socialist Realism’s construction of the Golden Age elucidates the mechanism by which Soviet culture appropriated and made use of an authoritative textuality to create a cultural continuity where none was to be had. Socialist Realist

fascination with the power of artistic teleological transformations of reality relies, then, on the concealed fascination with the (imagined, re- and over-constructed) past. This “epic past”, to borrow from Bakhtin via Clark again, becomes the imaginary source of stable cultural meanings and foundational myths. In other words, Socialist Realism had its own historical gap to cover – a gap in the magical belief in the power of the written word to carry the “truth”, the gap created by the modernist disillusionment in the semantic capacity of the linguistic sign. One can draw an analogy between this “gap” and the gap created as a result of the post-Stalin Soviet semantic incongruity. It is the myth of authoritative, unproblematic, legitimized and legitimizing textuality, then, that the post-Soviet culture lacks in its present and is all-too-eager to find in its past.

Post-Soviet culture’s fascination with Socialist Realism is therefore a fascination with the last instance in its national history where such textuality was possible; its compulsive return to Socialist myths, tropes and clichés, however ideologically discredited they may have become in the post-Soviet context, manifests a nostalgic desire to relive this type of authoritative textuality. The post-Soviet poaching of past *textualities* for meaning, then, is, in a way, a repetition of the path Socialist Realism once took in its quest to create a (mythic) Marxist historical continuity.

The post-Soviet texts that I examine in Chapter 3 stage a possibility of such historical continuity through their (re)turn to folklore, with its peculiar ways of meaning-production. This return parallels the Soviet revival of interest in Russian folklore⁵⁵ coinciding with the beginnings of Socialist Realism. The language of folklore, with its perverse ability to solidify meanings,

⁵⁵ Reinterpreted by the Soviet folklorists of the 1930s as the “creativity of the masses”, as Frank J. Miller argues in his definitive study of the subject. See Frank J. Miller, *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era*. New York: M.E. Sharps, 1991, and Frank J. Miller, “The Image of Stalin in Soviet Russian Folklore”. *The Russian Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Jan., 1980), pp. 50-67, esp. 53.

used to sustain the paternal metaphor of “Joseph-Our-Light Vissarionovich,”⁵⁶ and the post-Soviet return to folkloric strategies to frame the mythic content is a search for the Russian textual past that it shares with Socialist Realism.

In Chapter 4, I examine other attempts to relive and redeem Soviet mythologies by looking at post-Soviet rethinking of the legacy of the Space Race, and specifically, at the way in which the remnants of the Soviet heroic myth of the “conquerors of space” are used in post-Soviet literature and film to create a set of heroic, escapist, meta-ideological fantasies. These fantasies take place in the sublime, eerie outer space, which is staged, in Viktor Pelevin’s novel *Omon Ra* and Aleksei Gherman’s film *Paper Soldier*, as a reverse side of a Soviet dreamscape⁵⁷.

The post-Soviet nostalgic optic thus stabilizes the mythological space of Soviet culture, providing contemporary Russian culture with a workable past. In her *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Svetlana Boym examines the power that everyday Soviet mythologies held over the imagination of Soviet citizens; the very mode of Boym’s exploration also demonstrates that these mythologies are a retroactive, nostalgic construct⁵⁸. In Yurchak’s words, “the imaginary worlds within the fabric of socialist society gradually changed the very cultural logic of the Soviet system, deterritorializing it and rendering it increasingly incongruous with the descriptions it made of itself.”⁵⁹ With these imaginary worlds of Socialism gone upon the system’s downfall, the Soviet past solidified into the retroactively-produced Žižekian mythical object⁶⁰, the object produced by the loss itself. In this imaginary and imagined

⁵⁶ The phrase from a Soviet pseudofolkloric *novina* quoted in Miller 1991, 56.

⁵⁷ For more on the Soviet dreamscape in Pelevin, see Rajendra A. Chitnis, “Learning to Live with Emptiness: Viktor Pelevin, Vaclav Kahuda, Vlado Balla”, in Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russian and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech and Slovak fiction of the Changes*, 1988-1998 (BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 136-162.

⁵⁸ See Introduction to Boym 1994).

⁵⁹ Yurchak, 205.

⁶⁰ For Žižek’s discussion of the retroactive production of the mythical object see Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 37.

past, the two meanings of myth merge: it is a “myth” in a sense that it never existed, its illusory nature exposed by the collapse of Communist ideology and its post-Soviet deconstruction. Yet, it is also a “myth” in the Barthian⁶¹ sense, in a sense that the post-Soviet imagination inflects and expands the meanings attached to the signifiers of the Soviet state. The signs and symbols of the (Soviet) past are invested with other, new meanings, (re)constructed and used to structure and explain the country’s present, becoming a source of stable cultural meanings as a part of the shared historical legacy incorporated into the emergent narrative of the new Russian state.

How exactly do the cultural texts work “around” the rupture in the time of national history and in national mythology? How exactly is the cultural continuity created where the rupture seems to be so complete?

Pierre Nora suggests that cultural memory and cultural memorialization work by creating *lieux de mémoire*, explaining that “a *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community”⁶². These sites of memory are crystallization of [national] history into the mythic space of cultural memory⁶³, sites where history is reworked and appropriated to create an imaginary cultural identity. In the post-Soviet context, signifiers of the Socialist state provide a link to the mythologies of the national past, serving as constant reminders of what was lost. However, post-Soviet sites of memory, I argue, spread beyond the numerous Lenin Streets still endemic to Russian cities, beyond the Lenin Mausoleum and beyond the still-glittering Friendship of the Nations Fountain in Moscow.

⁶¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1972), esp. 129.

⁶² Pierre Nora, “From lieux de mémoire to realms of memory”, in Nora, Pierre and Lawrence D. Kritzman, eds., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past. Vol. 1: conflicts and divisions*. New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press. 1996, xv-xxiv, xvii.

⁶³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, in *Representations* 26, Spring 1989, 7-25, 7.

Cultural texts, too, become sites of memory, rhetorical topoi of memorialization in the scheme of post-Soviet culture⁶⁴, as they sift through the Lacanian cascade of signifiers and (re)organize them, preserving them in their own textual space.

In the words of Nina Tsyrkun, post-Soviet culture builds a new mythology on the ruins of the old one.⁶⁵ As the 1990s gave way to the rise of nationalist rhetoric in the Russian public discourse of the 2000s, it became evident that, as Kevin Platt puts it,

one dominant historical metaphor—that of historical rupture and social rebirth—has been replaced by another—that of civilizational continuity—as the authoritative tool for the construction of social identity. Neither of these public discursive formations accounts well for the actualities of social experience and a political history that exceed both in their complexity⁶⁶.

This study traces the roots of the metaphor of civilizational continuity, seeking to show that those same texts from the late 1980s and the 1990s that seemingly spoke only of rupture, were also always speaking about continuity. I propose that, along with centripetal forces at work in post-Soviet Russian culture, there were also always the centrifugal ones, which focused the old mythologies to bring them together to preserve and shield them from destruction. This study seeks to uncover the sites of memory that post-Soviet texts create in order to reflect on the Soviet narratives that came to an end, and on those that can be put in their place. I ask, what kinds of myths do post-Soviet texts rely on to construct a notion of continuity that overcomes what was previously discarded or destroyed? What myths are persistent enough to survive the historical gap?

⁶⁴ I draw here on Derrida's theory of "sites in language". See Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification", in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allen Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3-30, 28.

⁶⁵ Tsyrkun 1999, 62.

⁶⁶ Kevin M.F. Platt, "The Post-Soviet is Over: On Reading the Ruins", in *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1, no. 1 (May 1, 2009): <http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/41>.

The possibility of a historical continuity in literary and cinematic texts of the 1990s paradoxically emerges out of the features of these texts that, at first glance, seem to signify the symbolic collapse. The weak connections between events, the decontextualized signifiers, the disorganized space and the purposeless movements break the narrative and cinematic conventions, allowing for "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers... of the prohibitions of usual life."⁶⁷ Such temporary suspension, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, is characteristic of the specific modality of culture expressed in carnival that "offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things"⁶⁸. The new outlook is possible precisely because of the estrangement of familiar social and (one can extrapolate) symbolic structures that the carnival provides for its duration. This estrangement is achieved, according to Bakhtin, through the creation of a new, liberated context for the carnival's participants.

For Bakhtin, the enjoyment of observing a beggar playing the king at the carnival stems from the collective memory of his status outside of the carnival, that is, from the memory of the "authentic" context. This consideration brought about several anthropological studies that take Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque and apply it to the functioning of collective memory that is reactualized and reactivated during the carnival. The constant interplay of the social and cultural contexts confined to memory and created anew (through defamiliarization) at the carnival, emotionally imprint themselves on the subject through the affective power of laughter that accompanies the carnival's decontextualization. Joseph Roach formulates this cultural mode

⁶⁷ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984), 15.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

of memorialization/establishing cultural continuities as “that mental space where imagination and memory converge ... at once remembered and reinvented—the otherwise unthinkable”⁶⁹.

The Bakhtinian carnival, thus, is a cultural site where decontextualization can be a source of enjoyment and simultaneously serve as a form of memorialization, a paradoxical source of cultural continuity for a culture. Post-Soviet literature and film had done away with many of the conventions of representation; yet, the controlled transgression of the law for which the carnivalesque suspension of conventions allows, in the end sustains the law, its existence illuminated by its very absence. In this way, the very cultural texts that examine the Soviet legacy via its carnivalesque defamiliarization and attempt to map post-Soviet identity become sites of memorialization. Carnival, for Bakhtin, “is a place *for working out* [italics mine.- DK]... in half-real and half-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals.”⁷⁰ An exciting possibility then emerges: a possibility to read the 1990s as a pause that Russian culture takes to reflect on what has been lost and what can be salvaged from the past, much like the interpretative moment that Tzvetan Todorov describes in his theory of the fantastic as the hesitation that the subject experiences when their frame of reference clashes with the unknown. This interpretative moment “occupies the duration of [the] uncertainty”⁷¹ as the subject repositions themselves in the relation to the event, the breakdown of the Soviet system.

Post-Soviet culture suspends narrative and historical time in order to reflect on the past, to counter the ideological void of the late 1980s and 1990s. In Chapter 1, I examine post-Soviet reassessment of the myth of classic Russian literature as a source of profound, universal meanings, the myth of the Golden Age. As post-Soviet culture deconstructs the classic legacy in

⁶⁹ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996), 27.

⁷⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123.

⁷¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard, (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973), 25.

the form of various cultural myths about literature and language, as it examines the Soviet mythological imagination, it does so by means of literary texts themselves. These new textual sites consolidate the myth of Russian literature, becoming Boym's "common places", sites and loci of cultural mythologies⁷² that are persistent enough to survive the historical and cultural gap.

I use the term "imaginary places" to describe these textual sites; the "imaginary" here is the Lacanian imaginary⁷³, a foundational illusion of coherence and wholeness that underlies the possibility of signification. The texts I examine structure their narrative spaces to recreate and relive the illusion of the uninterrupted flow of historical time and of the possibility of meaning-production, even if on the surface they seem to be doing the complete opposite.

In this study, I focus on the sites of memory that emerge as a result of the reworkings of "domestic" mythologies. I concentrate on the diachronic dimension of the post-Soviet cultural process, on the "diachronic Others" of post-Soviet culture because the generation of post-Soviet writers and filmmakers who defined the field of culture in the 1990s are the carriers of the cultural memory of the Soviet past, the driving force behind the reworkings of Soviet textuality. The definitive figures of the post-Soviet literary landscape of the 1990s, Tatiana Tolstaia, Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin, along with the influential filmmakers like Nikita Mikhalkov, Karen Shakhnazarov, and Aleksei Gherman grappled not just with the legacy of the Soviet past, but more importantly, with the transformation they themselves had to undergo as former Soviet writers and filmmakers. As this older generation gradually leaves the field of cultural production in Russia, the younger generation's relative lack of emotional investment in the cultural memory of the Soviet state will lead this new cohort of writers and filmmakers to explore subjects beyond

⁷² Boym 1994, 4.

⁷³ For Lacan's discussion of this foundational illusion of unity, see Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co, 2004), 3-10.

memory and history, a process already underway. As the 1990s gave way to the 2000s, my readings show, the construction of post-Soviet myths became more focused, leaving the younger writers and filmmakers with a set of new, reworked cultural mythologies on which to build their own.

One might conclude, following the narrator of Fyodor Sologub's 1907 novel, *Petty Demon*, in the epigraph to this Introduction, that the seemingly helplessly referential post-Soviet Russian culture of the 1990s was only that – a traumatic repetition of the dead words of dead discourses. However, it is possible to read “might” in Sologub as an expression of a possibility: the repetition proved to be therapeutic as the 1990s drew to a close, as the seemingly dead Soviet textuality gradually carved a place of its own among the myths of Russian culture.

CHAPTER 1

The Writer, the Reader, the Character: Re-mythologizing Post-Soviet Literary Space.

Yet, ... modern mind is so sophisticated that it often keeps on thinking even after having realized that it does not exist.

Viktor Pelevin, T

Однако... современный ум изощрен настолько, что нередко продолжает думать, даже поняв, что его нет.

Виктор Пелевин, Т

The Unmaking of the State Reader.

“I’m not one of those people who mourns the good old times when the USSR supposedly was the ‘most well-read country in the world’ [*sam[aia] chitaiusch[iaia] stran[a] v mire*]. If you listen to those people, you might get an idea that every Soviet citizen was an avid reader, and of only good books. But this was just another fiction of the Soviet propaganda”, claims Nina Litvinets, the Editor-in-Chief of Moscow’s famous Raduga Publishers. She continues:

We, publishers, remember that... a hundred thousand copies of every book in the ‘Masters of Contemporary Prose Series’ were published¹, and the [Soviet] distribution channels [still] worked... [but] the bookstores in the province

¹ *Mastera Sovremennoi Prozy* Series (that included more than a hundred titles of 20th century fiction from all over the world translated into Russian) was a series of Progress Publishers, transferred over to Raduga Publishers in 1982. Litvinets’s assessment of readership in Russia, then, refers to the 1980s.

received maybe a couple of copies, and that was it... [Good contemporary prose] was read only by the *intelligentsia* who either used the library or paid an arm and a leg for those books on the black market... For the mass reader, all these “Masters” were just nonsense, its intellectual content was hidden [from the mass reader]. Now [in 1997] the mass reader actually reads what we publish. Women who used to only read “Woman Worker” [*Rabotnitsa*] magazine and wouldn’t touch a book, now read romance novels, are happy and think of it as great “me-time”. By the way, romance is appreciated not just by the female readers of a modest intellectual potential. It’s a great way to relax, an escape from all the ugliness that’s just outside your window, it’s a plunge into the other, much more pleasant world, into a world of dreams...²

Litvinets’s comments on post-Soviet readership in this 1997 interview reveal an interesting ambiguity. On the one hand, Litvinets, at the helm of a publishing house in the six-year-old market economy³, is clearly excited about the expanding market for mass literature; this excitement may also stem from a certain leveling of the traditional divide between high and low culture that Russia experienced in the 1990s, a result of an influx

² Galina Shulga. “Luybov’ i “Raduga”(Beseda s direktorom izdatel’sтва N.S. Litvinets)”, *Inostrannaia Literatura* 7 (1997) (online version available at <http://magazines.russ.ru/inostran/1997/7/lov.html>). “Мы-то, издатели, помним, что когда «Мастера современной прозы» выходили тиражом сто тысяч экземпляров ... то в провинциальный магазин ... все равно доходило в лучшем случае 2 экземпляра книги... Нас читала только интеллигенция, добывая книги либо в библиотеке, либо втридорога на черном рынке, но ни в коем случае не через торговую сеть. Для массового читателя все эти «Мастера» были полной мурой, интеллектуальный смысл их оставался скрытым. Сейчас нас читает именно массовый читатель, «человек с улицы». Женщины, которые раньше читали только журнал «Работница», а за книгу даже и не брались, теперь читают любовный роман, счастливы и считают это замечательным отдыхом. Кстати, дамские романы любят не только читательницы со скромным интеллектуальным потенциалом. Это прекрасное отдохновение, это уход от того неприглядного, что ты видишь за окном, погружение в иной, более приятный мир мечты”.

³ Litvinets will later go on to be the Executive Vice-President of Russian Book Union [*Rossiiskii Knizhnyi Soiuz*], the national association of Russian publishers)

of Western consumer-oriented culture, the runaway creative freedoms and the adoption of a set of postmodern sensibilities.

On the other hand, however, the “modest intellectual potential” of the mass reader who missed their chances to appreciate the “intellectual content” of Alejo Carpentier and Chinua Achebe in the 1970s and 1980s still seems to ring somewhat bitter, which Litvinets quickly covers up by stressing the social and psychological benefits of a mass literature that allows the post-Soviet reader to escape the harsh socioeconomic reality of a country in transition.

Litvinets’s claim that the Soviet reader hardly ever read “good” prose points to an implicit assumption about the nature of Soviet readership operating in the discourse of post-Soviet intellectuals. This assumption is predicated on what the National Association of Book Publishers, the Russian Book Union, calls a myth⁴ - that the Soviet Union was indeed the “most well-read” and that the books being read were “good.” Litvinets claims that no serious readership studies ever supported the myth, but this myth might not be in any need of support. In 2008, the nostalgic myth was alive and well in a major academic study of post-Soviet readership, which, summing up the effects of a transitional economy on readership in Russia, claimed that “Russian readers of nearly every gender, age and education level have *transitioned* [*pereshli*, italics mine. - DK] to mass fiction.”⁵ The starting point of this transition can be nothing else than the “good books” read by everyone in the “most well-read country in the world.”

⁴ Among the stated goals of the Russian Book Union (Rossiiskii Knizhnyi Soiuz) is “to correct the myth of ‘the most reading country in the world’”. See: Rossiiskii Knizhnyi Soiuz, “Deiatel’nost Rossiiskogo Knizhnogo Soiuz”, <http://www.bookunion.ru/pages/mero.html>.

⁵ B. Dubin, N. Zorkaia, *Chteniie v Rossii 2008: Tendentsii i Problemy* (Moskva: Analiticheskii Tsentr Iuriia Levady, 2008), 25. “Коротко говоря, на массовую беллетристику более или менее перешли читатели, принадлежащие практически ко всем половозрастным и образовательным группам российского населения.”

This study, “Readership in Russia, 2008: Trends and Problems” (*Chtenie v Rossii 2008: tendentsii i problemy*) was conducted by the Levada Center (*Analiticheskii tsentr Iurii Levady*) at the request of Federal Department of Print and Mass Communications⁶. The results of the 2008 readership study were perceived in the media as shocking: metaphors like “catastrophe of readership”⁷ abound in the press coverage of the study’s release.

Indeed, the findings of the Levada Center (further referred to as the Levada report) are grim if read from within the model of a culture that maintains a sharp division between “good” and “bad” literature. “Even the most educated and progressive readers”, the Levada report muses, “are clearly oriented towards a passive-adaptive type of cultural behavior and consumption; [even these readers display] an absence of analytic interest in the surrounding reality with its controversies, an inclination towards entertainment and escapism, towards a leveling of [cultural] taste.”⁸

At first glance, the attitude towards mass literature expressed by Litvinets (implicitly) and by the Levada report (explicitly) is predicated just on intellectual elitism, a familiar stance for the Russian intellectuals: literature should be good, otherwise it is no literature (significantly, the Levada report even argues that, in the Russian context, “reading” means reading fiction⁹). However, the report’s nearly prescriptive demand for

⁶ The Levada Center’s nongovernmental status, its spotless reputation and its world-class staff analysts ensure that the results of its studies are nearly automatically given a vote of confidence in contemporary Russian public discourse (in a sharp contrast to those of RosStat, the Russian Federal Statistics Service)

⁷ See, e.g., Federal Portal of State Program of Readership Support (Federal’naia Programma Podderzhki Chteniia). Ol’ga Frolova, “Katastrofa chteniia v Rossii”, <http://www.chtenie-21.ru/p-19>, accessed Jan 7, 2010

⁸ Dubin 2008: 29. “В чтении даже самых образованных и продвинутых читательских групп сегодня отчетливы ориентации на пассивно-адаптивный тип культурного поведения и потребления, отсутствие аналитического интереса к окружающей современности во всех ее противоречивых чертах, склонность к развлечению и эскапизму, усреднение вкусов”.

⁹ Dubin 2008: 27. “‘Читать’ означает ‘читать художественную литературу’”.

“analytic interest in the surrounding reality,” magnified by formulating this interest in terms of absence, makes one suspect that the issue at stake is not precisely “good literature versus bad literature” (after all, the 1990s have somewhat leveled the divide, as is evident in Litvinets’s interview). Or, rather, the definitions of good and bad literature are hardly drawn along the lines of literary aesthetics proper. However different are the attitudes expressed in Litvinets’s interview and in the Levada report towards the escape provided by mass literature, they are nonetheless similar in their mode of assessing literature in terms of its *goals*: both Litvinets and the Levada report are very interested in what literature (and reading it) should *do*. Mass literature fulfilled its role of providing escape from “real life” just as well in the 2000s as it did in 1990s. Yet the reader’s escape into literary worlds was deemed “good” for the society in the tumultuous 1990s and turned out to be “bad” in the 2000s, when escapism could no longer serve the needs of Russia’s rediscovered statehood. The difference between Litvinets’s relatively favorable assessment of mass literature and the Levada report’s condemnation thereof is then best explained not by the sudden reversal of Russian intellectuals’ attitude towards mass fiction, but by how well the objective literary and publishing trends are aligned with the perceived social demands imposed on literature. What emerges from the comparative diachronic analysis of Russian intellectuals’ assessment of Russian readership is the obvious persistence of the intellectual model which assigns the task of moderating social trends, whichever they are, to literature.

The Levada report reads as a work of mourning; the object of mourning is a peculiar kind of interaction of literature with the reader and the state. Peppered by phrases such as “no longer...” and “loss of...”, the Levada report traces a gradual decline

in the interest in reading back to (and at times outright blames it on) the disintegration of state institutions that used to promote and support readership in the Soviet era. What the report mourns is a particular sensibility, a mode of reception of literature that was shaped by these state institutions and, the report concludes, was perhaps too quickly thrown away together with other remnants of Soviet ideology. It is this sensibility that was at the core of the myth of the Soviet Union as the “most well-read country in the world.”

In his seminal study of Soviet readership, Evgeny Dobrenko outlines the aesthetic and ideological factors in Soviet literary production and reception that shape the peculiar Soviet mode of reading. “In contrast to the “explanatory” passion of the Western aesthetics of reception”, Dobrenko suggests, “Soviet aesthetic doctrine started out from an assumption of the “transformational” nature of aesthetic activity (in accordance with Marx’s eleventh thesis about Feuerbach).”¹⁰ The framework of this doctrine, Dobrenko’s study convincingly shows, defines the representational principles of Socialist Realism and its implicitly modernist goal¹¹ of transforming life through art. However, such an aesthetic doctrine also had implications for the reader of literary texts produced within it: as the transformational nature of Soviet aesthetics is imposed not just on literary production but also on literary reception, the Soviet reader, Dobrenko demonstrates, acquires a set of responsibilities, the first and most important of which is to *become* a reader.

The process of becoming, Dobrenko continues, is facilitated by state-controlled institutions, the school and the library being the most significant of those. The term Dobrenko suggests for such “transformation of aesthetics into aesthetic education” is

¹⁰ See Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*. 1st ed. (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1997), 17

¹¹ For more on the relationship between Socialist Realism and modernism, see Groys 1992, esp. 36.

“*pedagogization of aesthetics*.”¹² Indeed, it is the post-Soviet lack of aesthetic education in the absence of Soviet primary facilitators of readership, the school and the library, that the Levada report concludes to be the reason for the post-Soviet “catastrophe of readership”.

This particular post-Soviet catastrophe, the Levada report continues, is a symbolic one. Among the reasons why post-Soviet readers flat out refuse to fulfill their “obligation” to read (an unusually curt sentence in the otherwise elaborately phrased report stands out by flatly stating, “46 per cent of adult Russians do not read books”¹³), the report names “the external democratization, which largely resulted in a massive loss of trust in social institutions in general, including the school and the library.”¹⁴ These institutions “of literary culture lost not only their former symbolic value and authority, but also their former role in structuring the reading of the masses, in providing and disseminating influential models.”¹⁵

The mention of symbolic authority in the report needs to be given some consideration. The Levada report concludes that the disintegration of Soviet *intelligentsia*’s “ideology of enlightenment”, completed by the mid-1990s, eliminated the role of *intelligentsia* as an important source of cultural authority. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, this source was sustained through transmitting the “ideology of enlightenment” through codified, legitimized, and stable channels of communication like

¹² Dobrenko 1997, 17.

¹³ Dubin 2008, 21. “46 процентов взрослых россиян не читают книг”.

¹⁴ Dubin 2008, 5. “...внешняя демократизация, которая во многом повлекла за собой массовую потерю доверия к социальным институтам вообще, включая, среди прочих, школу и библиотеку”.

¹⁵ Dubin 2008, 39-40. “Прежние институты книжной культуры – библиотека, школа, вуз, литературная критика – утратили не только свое прежнее символическое значение, авторитетность, но и свою прежнюю роль в структурировании процессов массового чтения, представлении и распространении влиятельных образцов”.

“thick journals”¹⁶ and “literature-centric school education”¹⁷. The report deems unsuccessful post-Soviet attempts on the part of the state to fill the void of cultural authority with federal readership support programs¹⁸.

The Levada report, then, not just subscribes to the rather conservative definition of culture as something promoted by the intellectuals. The report also mourns the lost pedagogical value of literature, promoting (as intellectuals should) the controlled pedagogization of aesthetics, which was characteristic, as Dobrenko shows, of the Soviet cultural paradigm. The intelligentsia’s authority now in shambles and the state authority over culture in general and readership in particular not living up to the expectations, the Levada report does outline the steps that need to be taken on the state level to restore the symbolic authority associated with literary culture. However, the report’s recommendations, having resulted in some policy declarations to promote readership in 2009¹⁹, are nowhere as interesting as the Levada report’s own unconscious search for the source of cultural authority to fill the perceived void. The report suggests, or, rather, wishes for, the void to be filled not by a social institution or a group. In the absence of both state and intellectuals’ tangible authority over readership, an unexpectedly mythological authority (“author-ity”) emerges from the report’s conclusions.

¹⁶ “Thick journals” (*tolstyie zhurnaly*), publishing literary criticism along with literary texts, were an important channel of disseminating literary culture in Russia since late 18th century. The specific period in the history of literary journals to which the Levada report refers is *perestroika*, when “thick journals” become an arena for public debate not just about literature, but about Soviet political ideology.

¹⁷ See Dubin 2008, 6.

¹⁸ Like National Program of Readership Support and Development (Национальная программа поддержки и развития чтения), launched in 2006.

¹⁹ Thus, a document titled “Declaration in Support of the Book” (“Deklaratsiia o podderzhke knigi”) was signed by the member countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, an umbrella organization for the certain former Soviet Republics, in February 2009. Interestingly, in an unexpected logocentric move, the text of the document uses the term “book” to encompass reading practices and cultural value of reading. For the text of the Declaration, see Federal’noie Agentstvo po Pechati i Massovym Kommunikatsiiam, “Deklaratsiia o podderzhke knigi”, http://www.fapmc.ru/files/download/696_file.pdf.

“In [Russia of the 2000s], compared to the late-Soviet period, to the years of *perestroika* and to the attempts of systemic transformation in the 1990s, there emerged, in a certain sense, a different society [literally, “other society” [*drugoe obschestvo*]. – DK]”, the Levada report claims;

Characteristic for this society is the sharp deficit of figures of authority, with the exception of the state leaders. *Thus* [italics mine. - DK], the names of even the most influential Russian writers of the 20th and 21st century were recalled by only very few respondents [of the survey]. Among leaders here are [Sergei] Yesenin (14%), recently departed [Aleksandr] Solzhenitsyn²⁰ (10%), plus three or four other authors – within the margin of statistical error. There are no recognized public elites, there are no independent channels of transmission of their ideas, examples and assessments, thus there are no symbols [shared by everyone]²¹.

The nearly careless automaticity of conflating social, symbolic, and literary authority in this reflection speaks volumes about the model of culture that is often deemed to be characteristically Russian. While Yesenin and Solzhenitsyn’s appearance in the report is of course explained by the nature of the survey (which was, after all, focused on what people read), the report’s own wording, nonetheless, hardly leaves any room for conventional sources of symbolic authority other than the state and literature (like athletes, entertainers, or other types of influential social players). Putting the state and

²⁰ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn died in 2008.

²¹ Dubin 2008, 69-70. “В стране по сравнению с позднесоветским периодом, с годами перестройки и периодом, попыток системной трансформации советского социума в 1990-е гг. сло жилось в определенном смысле *другое общество*. Оно другое по структуре коммуникаций, по их интенсивности (точнее, наоборот, их неинтенсивности), по содержанию этих коммуникаций. Для него характерен, резкий дефицит общих авторитетов, за исключением первых лиц государства. Так, имена даже самых влиятельных отечественных писателей XX–XXI вв. могут назвать лишь немногие опрошенные. Лидируют Есенин (14%), только что ушедший Солженицын (10%), плюс еще три-четыре автора – в границах статистической достоверности. Нет признанных публичных элит, нет независимых каналов коммуникации их идей, образцов и оценок, поэтому нет и общих символов”.

literature in dangerously close textual proximity outlines the place of literature in the Russian intellectuals' prescriptive and pedagogical model of culture. Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis sum up this place in the following way:

For Russia, literature is a [universal] reference point, a credo, an ideological and moral foundation... For such mutual understanding only classical literature would do. Classical literature is a universal language based on absolute values... [One can even speak] not about the unique nature of Russian literature, but about the unique nature of the Russian reader, who is inclined to see the sacred national property in their favorite books. Criticizing the classics is the same thing as criticizing motherland²².

The reader Vail' and Genis construct here is a nostalgically idealized reader: the quotation comes from a collection of essays meant to reintroduce the post-Soviet reader to Russian classical literature. In the 1990s, when the collection was put together, the readers flocked, as Nina Litvinets reminds us, to the foreign, and newly-available domestic²³, mass literature, towards the escape that genre fiction provides. They may have fled the pedagogized Soviet aesthetics of reception. Vail' and Genis explain, in the essay on the 19th-century Russian critic Vissarion Belinskii (a compulsory reading in the Soviet "literature-centric school education"), that

²² Vail', Petr, and Aleksandr Genis. "Rodnaia Rech': Uroki iziaschnoi slovesnosti", in *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh. Tom 1* (Yekaterinburg: U-Faktoriia, 2003), 6-271: 7-8. The essays were originally published by "Nezavisimaia Gazeta" in 1991. "Для России литература -- точка отсчета, символ веры, идеологический и нравственный фундамент. ... Классика - универсальный язык, основанный на абсолютных ценностях... Впрочем, с таким же -- если не большим - успехом можно было бы говорить не об уникальности русской литературы, а об уникальности русского читателя, склонного видеть в любимых книгах самую священную национальную собственность. Задеть классика - все равно что оскорбить родину".

²³ On the emergence of domestic popular fiction, see Introduction to Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[Belinskii's] judgments [about literature] had... drastic consequences for Russian reader: they became a model for teaching literary criticism in schools.

[Belinskii's] idea that "literature is a textbook of life" turned the study of literature into a particular subject: "life-ology" [*zhiznevedeniie*]²⁴. The characters became role models, their fate was a model for [real life] relationships... In essence, all of the [Russian] classic literature, as interpreted by the [Soviet] school, is a type of moral doctrine, a peculiar surrogate of religion²⁵.

While the mass reader seems to stop reading Russian classics and "serious" literature in general in the 1990s, Vail' and Genis still conclude that the imaginary Russian reader treats (or at least should treat) the texts as an "encoded revelation", which needs to be decoded on the basis of the particular reader's "individual spiritual experience."²⁶ Such wishful, and nostalgic, thinking only attests to the fact that, for post-Soviet intellectuals, there remains an unconscious attraction not just to Belinskiian "life-ology" approach to reading literary texts, but also to the transformational and pedagogized Soviet aesthetics of reception, even as Socialist ideology underlying both is already discredited. By inviting the reader to look to the classics in their search for their own identity, Vail' and Genis preserve the pedagogical value of literary text, appealing to the meta-ideological value of the Russian classics: "in order to read [the classics] there

²⁴ Vail' and Genis continue that the reader is supposed to "outgrow" Belinskii's 'proto-Socialist Realist' approach (establishing a pragmatic connection between, if not outright conflating, art and life, Belinskii's literary criticism is undoubtedly an important source of the Soviet doctrine of transformational aesthetics discussed by Dobrenko). Nonetheless, Vail' and Genis still seem to have a particular affinity to Belinskii's "life-ology". Thus, they continue to be Belinskian in spirit when, in another essay in the collection, they reason about which of two characters is "better" (read: which of the two can serve as the most beneficial role model).

²⁵ Vail', Genis 2003, 96. "Но куда более грандиозные последствия суды Белинского имели для русского читателя... Идея 'литература - учебник жизни', к которой со временем свели творчество Белинского, превратила словесность в особый учебный предмет - жизневедение. Персонажи стали примерами, на судьбе которых разбирались модели взаимоотношений... По сути, вся наша классика в школьной интерпретации - вид нравственной доктрины, своеобразный суррогат религии".

²⁶ Vail', Genis 2003, 99.

was no need to wait for the next ‘thaw’²⁷. We often forget that when schoolchildren in the Stalin era learned something by heart, it was not just [the state-approved] Demyan Bednyi’s poems, but Lermontov’s, too.”²⁸

Now that Stalin comes into the picture, a return to Dobrenko’s discussion of how the Soviet “state reader” was made might provide an insight into the reasons why transformational and pedagogized aesthetics of reception retain their attractiveness in the post-Soviet context.

Boris Groys discusses, in his *Total Art of Stalinism*, Socialist Realism’s late-Soviet legacy, and notes this aesthetic paradigm’s exceptional conduciveness for mythologizing not just the objects of art, but aesthetic practices themselves. Groys argues that, in the late-Soviet context, “the devices of Stalinist indoctrination were [used to demonstrate] the similarity of this myth to those of both the present and the past to reconstruct the single mythological network in which the modern consciousness functions.”²⁹ The evident temptation of Stalinist mythology for late-Soviet art lies in the figure of Stalin, the “artist-tyrant” in Groys’s words, who for Stalinist art becomes a locus of symbolic, but also of aesthetic, authority. It is Stalin’s power to hold myths about the state (but also myths about art) together that late-Soviet art, not anymore overseen by a similar source of authority³⁰, nostalgically seeks.

Thus, Stalinist mythology becomes especially relevant in the late- and post-Soviet context; it is then not entirely surprising that part of it, the mythologized Soviet reader, is

²⁷ Vail’ and Genis refer to the “Khrushchev Thaw,” a period of relative democratization in Soviet history (roughly 1956-64), associated with more creative freedoms; the name comes from the title of Il’ia Ehrenburg’s 1954 novel, *Ottepel’* (*The Thaw*).

²⁸ Vail’, Genis 2003, 8. “А главное - чтобы читать Чехова и Толстого, не надо было ждать очередной “оттепели”. Часто забывается, что школьники сталинской эпохи учили наизусть не только Демьяна Бедного, но и Лермонтова”.

²⁹ Groys 1992, 95.

³⁰ See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of Stalin as the Soviet paternal metaphor.

a concept that has a potential to inform the post-Soviet reader. What exactly is this mythologized Soviet reader, then, and what happens to him³¹ in the post-Soviet context?

As Dobrenko shows in his analysis of the Soviet reader's politics of interpretation, this reader is a paradoxical creature: he actively searches literary texts for models of their own behavior, and actively negotiates, through a variety of state-supported feedback channels, both the form and the content of literature. "Characteristic [for the Soviet reader]", Dobrenko concludes, "is the effort to explain an image while overlooking its 'literariness.'"³² In practice, however, this does not mean that the Soviet reader fails to see a difference between literary characters and "real" people, boundary between life and art thoroughly blurred by Socialist Realist method. Instead, the reader has to adopt a paradoxical mode of reading which simultaneously reinforces and ignores this boundary. To reformulate Dobrenko's argument in the language of psychoanalysis, this reader knows very well that what he reads is not "life" but, in a classic fetishist move, very much wants it to be, to an extent that he sometimes forgets about ever knowing the difference.

On the one hand, this reader is extremely pragmatic, trying to fit himself into the character's shoes, or to compare the representations of social phenomena with his own experience of these phenomena. On the other hand, this reader still turns to the text as the authorized source of socially and politically relevant models, as the state legitimizes the controlled environment of the text to be a "better" source of such models than "real life". This reader emerges as a result of intensive soul-searching, to which reading serves as an

³¹ I intentionally use the pronoun 'he', following Dobrenko, as this reader is a variant of model Soviet heroic masculinity.

³² Dobrenko 1997, 107.

occasion; he emerges a dutiful learner of channeled and sanctioned social meanings that the text itself, interestingly, may or may not possess.

What happens to the author of the text, so promptly ignored by both the imaginary Soviet and the post-Soviet reader so far? Is there a place for the author in the mythological quest of the Soviet reader, beyond divining “what the author wanted to say?”

“*The [Soviet] reader does not want to read the author’s text*”, Dobrenko argues, “since he is entirely carried away by the reading of his own, second meaning of the text, to which he gives birth in the process of reading.”³³ By putting production and reception into dangerously close proximity, such mode of reading, then, blurs the line between the reader and the writer. Dobrenko illustrates the easiness with which a Soviet reader could become a Soviet writer with several case studies. In a way, this is a “natural” move; when, channeled through the prescriptive messages of the state institutions, literary characters insistently serve as real-life role models, the reverse relationship in which real-life models become literary characters flows from the mode of reading as “writing oneself.”

When the Levada report insists that the Russian reader of the 2000s is passive and dispassionate, it implicitly compares this reader to the Soviet model, to the reader who is “‘different from all the other readers in the world, a Soviet reader, a reader-builder, and a reader-fighter’... This literary character is what the ideal Soviet reader is;”³⁴ this reader is essentially a Socialist Realist character³⁵.

³³ Dobrenko 1997, 111.

³⁴ Ibid., 301-302.

³⁵ Ibid., 258.

This mythological figure may seem just a nostalgic post-Soviet conjecture; however, Soviet literary production and reception were so deeply intertwined that a post-Soviet return to the mythology of readership points to some of the processes in post-Soviet literary production that aim to cover the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the reader and the text staged by post-Soviet intellectuals.

The Unmaking of the State Writer: Literary Landscape in Ruins?

The fate of the book would decide Pavel's own fate. If the manuscript was rejected that would be the end for him. If, on the other hand, it was found to be bad only in part, [...] he would launch a new offensive. His mother took the parcel with the manuscript to the post office. Days of anxious waiting began. Never in his life had Pavel waited in such anguished suspense for a letter as he did now. He lived from the morning to the evening post. But no news came from Leningrad. The continued silence of the publishers began to look ominous. From day to day the presentiment of disaster mounted, and Pavel admitted to himself that total rejection of his book would finish him. That, he could not endure. There would be no longer any reason to live. [...] At last, when the agony of waiting had become well-nigh unbearable, his mother, who had been suffering from the suspense no less than her son, came running into the room with the cry:

“News from Leningrad!”

It was a telegram from the Regional Committee. A terse message on a telegraph form:

“Novel heartily approved. Turned over to publishers. Congratulations on your victory”.

His heart beat fast. His cherished dream was realised! The steel bonds have been burst, and now, armed with a new weapon, he had returned to the fighting ranks and to life³⁶.

Nikolai Ostrovskii's narration becomes clipped; time shrinks in the closing pages of *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1930-32) as his protagonist, Pavel Korchagin, anxiously awaits the state's permission to become a Soviet writer, thus staging an "aesthetic revolution from below."³⁷

Disabled by his war wounds, paralyzed and blind, Korchagin searches for a way to rejoin the ranks of the builders of the new Soviet state; writing seems to be the only option left. Having missed on much of his formal education, Korchagin understands that his writing skills are lacking; he improves them by becoming a voracious reader and only then emerges as a writer, "heartily approved" by the Party Committee.

This plot stages a model for the Soviet reader to become a Soviet writer, but it also goes beyond just that, establishing a mode of "complete identification with the hero, [...] a desire to replace a literary character, to turn life into literature."³⁸ The author of Korchagin, Nikolai Ostrovskii, the Russian Civil War veteran, turned his own life into literature, modelling the literary character on himself. Korchagin, in turn, became a personal favorite (and a role model) for the Great Patriotic War youth resistance group leader, Oleg Koshevoi; this diligent Soviet reader himself went on to become a literary character, in Aleksandr Fadeev's Socialist Realist masterpiece, *The Young Guard* (1946; 1951). The interaction between Nikolai Ostrovskii, Pavel Korchagin, and Oleg Koshevoi

³⁶ Nikolay Ostrovsky. *How The Steel Was Tempered*. Translated from the Russian by R. Prokofieva. Moscow: Progress Publishers (Progress Soviet Author Library), no year (1973). P.141-142.

³⁷ Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture*. 1st ed. (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2002), xx.

³⁸ Dobrenko 1997, 289.

demonstrates that, as Soviet critics would put it, “before our very eyes, the hero crosses from the pages of the book into life... the full cycle of interaction of literature and reality is completed”³⁹.

This is a disturbing aesthetic of reception, and it may seem surprising that the ideal Soviet reader, packaged together with an unmistakably avant-garde call for total art, is indeed the nostalgic object mourned by post-Soviet intellectuals. After all, this aesthetic is defined by the “absence of the boundary between Konstantin Simonov⁴⁰ and a Kaluga tractor driver”⁴¹ (as Dobrenko succinctly puts it), and thus is inherently counter-elitist. Can the ideal Soviet reader become a post-Soviet nostalgic object?

Stripped of Socialist ideology, however, the distilled myth of the adolescent⁴² Soviet reader can become a nostalgic object for both intellectual paternalist elitism and for the post-Soviet writer. This reader does not resist, and even welcomes, the exceptional porosity of the boundary between the reader, the character and the writer, while retaining a deep respect for the work of art. This reader is everything the post-Soviet writer wishes for, for a number of reasons.

In his *Remaining Relevant After Communism*, Andrew Wachtel examines the post-Communist shift in the social perception of the role of writer. Socialist ideology not informing aesthetic practices anymore, the change in the status of a writer in post-Communist societies is intrinsically connected to the issue of Socialism eliminating the

³⁹ S. Tregub and I. Bashelis, “Schast’e Korchagina”, in “Znamia”, 4(1944), 127 (quoted in Dobrenko 1997: 290).

⁴⁰ Dobrenko refers here to Konstantin Simonov (1915-1979), an eminent Soviet poet, six-time Stalin Award laureate and the functionary of the Union of Soviet Writers.

⁴¹ Dobrenko 2002:279.

⁴² “In principle, Ostrovskii’s novel [*How the Steel Was Tempered*] presupposes a child reader, either a child or an infantile adult who “for his entire life connects his ideal of man with an image of a hero idealized by him most often in his middle years of school. In his behavior he is guided by thoughts of how this hero would act in his own situation. Pavel Korchagin was just this sort of ideal for Oleg Koshevoi” (Dobrenko 1997:151)

possibility of choice, Wachtel suggests⁴³. In post-Communist societies, the formerly monolithic audience segmented through the increase in the number of published titles and the decrease in the number of copies of each title, Wachtel shows (and several publishing industry surveys⁴⁴, together with the Levada report's findings, support this observation for the Russian case).

The post-Communist writers, Wachtel continues, found themselves negotiating literary pluralism⁴⁵: one single author could no longer capture the attention of every reader, and their readers no longer shared a single (or at least comparable) social experience⁴⁶. In this light, Vail' and Genis's call in the 1990s for the return to the classics becomes a social imperative: the classics provide the readers with a universal language⁴⁷ just when, in Wachtel's model of a post-Communist society, "great work[s] of literature [that can] recapitulate the general truths of people's experience⁴⁸" are seemingly no longer produced.

In the 1990s, the suddenly-post-Soviet writer had found him- or herself in the situation where the *universal* language of Soviet ideology has revealed itself to be a *universalizing* language. Michael Gorham, speaking about the 1990s, notes that

most of the major [literary] trends that have emerged in the past decade have done so if not as a kind of linguistic revolt against the clichéd and tightly controlled

⁴³ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2006), esp. 217).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Irina Kabanova, "Sladostnyi Plen: Perevodnaia Massovaia Literatura v Rossii v 1997-1998 godakh", in "Volga", 10 (1999), online version available at <http://magazines.russ.ru/volga/1999/10/kaban.html>.

⁴⁵ Wachtel 217.

⁴⁶ Wachtel 218.

⁴⁷ Vail' and Genis 2003, 7.

⁴⁸ Wachtel 218.

language of the Soviet state, then at least as an alternative source of linguistic authority to fill the void created by that language's wholesale de-legitimation⁴⁹.

In other words, post-Soviet disillusionment in the formerly universal language sanctioned by the Soviet ideology was negotiated on two levels. In terms of post-Soviet language, the amount of linguistic and genre experimentation, and verbal innovation readily observed across post-Communist literatures of the 1990s attests to Gorham's observation that "periods of radical social change tend to share a basic dynamic in the evolution of language culture— one in which the rejection of old models of writing and speaking lead to verbal innovation and the articulation of a new order."⁵⁰

On another level, the experimentation and innovation characteristic of the post-Soviet literary landscape can be read as a paradoxical nostalgic mechanism. By searching for the ways to articulate the reality, by coming up with ways to fix it in language, these experimental texts seek to reestablish the authority of the written word over this reality, that is, to return to the mythological possibility of having a universal language in which to speak, to replace the dysfunctional language that Communist ideology formerly provided. The runaway post-Communist textuality was, after all, navigating a void whose boundaries were shaped by the Soviet institutions of literary production and reception.

To see how the processes of linguistic experimentation and articulation of the renewed authority of language over social reality are intertwined, one is bound to turn to the case of the Viktor Pelevin, the major figure of the contemporary Russian literary

⁴⁹ Michael S. Gorham, "Language Culture and National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia", in *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia*, Ingunn Lunde, ed. (Bergen: Slavica Bergensia, 2006), 18-31, 19-20.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 19.

landscape. Aleksandr Genis speaks of the “Pelevin phenomenon,” formulating Pelevin’s contribution to the post-Soviet search for a new language in the following way:

Pelevin was often (and unreasonably) criticized for his inability to write beautifully [*pisat’ krasivo*]. This is, of course, pure nonsense; Pelevin searches for – and usually finds – the new linguistic strata. When asked, “what do you think post-*perestroika* Russia is, linguistically,” he answers... : “The *logos* is tired of being ‘preserved,’ it is tired of rotting in the mouth of a powerless *intelligent* – and it has returned to life in the language of fighting demons. The speech of the thugs [iconically associated with the early 1990s and often featured in Pelevin’s prose. -DK] possesses an incredible power, because behind every turn of their *bazar* [thug slang for “discourse” - DK] there is a very real flicker of life and death. This is why it is very interesting to formulate the metaphysical truths [in the language of the thugs] – in their language, these truths become alive.”⁵¹

Pelevin does not want to “write beautifully” because the notion of “harmonious,” smooth textuality belongs to, as the Levada report would have it, the “ideology of enlightenment” carried by the Soviet *intelligentsia*, who now ostensibly have their mouth stuffed with the rotting *logos*. Pelevin looks, instead, for the kind of language that bridges the gap between the signifier and the signified, the gap that was extensively widened by the Soviet clichéd rhetoric, and fixed, Pelevin suggests, by the Russian intellectual discourse which falls back on the “old” models of expression.

⁵¹ Aleksandr Genis. “Fenomen Pelevina”, <http://pelevin.nov.ru/stati/o-gen1/1.html>. “Пелевина часто и несправедливо ругали за неумение писать красиво. Это, конечно, чепуха, Пелевин ищет — и обычно находит — новые языковые пласты. ... на вопрос, что для вас ‘постперестроечная Россия в языковом плане’ Пелевин отвечает следующим образом: “Логос устал ‘храниться’, устал преть во рту бессильного интеллигента — и возродился в языке сражающихся демонов. В речи братков есть невероятная сила, потому что за каждым поворотом их базара реально мерцает жизнь и смерть. Поэтому на их языке очень интересно формулировать метафизические истины — они оживают”.

While the colorful speech of post-Soviet thugs may indeed bring [Russian] language and the [social] reality it is supposed to reflect closer to each other, Pelevin's relatively early post-Soviet linguistic experiment suggests that what covers the gap between the signifier and the signified created on the ruins of the Soviet language is the language of immense, if schizophrenic, potential of signification—indeed the language of power.

In Pelevin's 1992 novella, *Ukhriab*, an aging retiree, Ivan Maralov, gradually slips into insanity, slowly realizing that everything around him is *ukhriab*. The nonsensical noun appears in Maralov's consciousness together with a morning-after headache, and he dismisses it as result of overindulging. However, he gradually starts seeing *ukhriab* in surrounding objects. It is noteworthy that Maralov does not precisely *see ukhriab*: a product of Soviet "readerly" culture, he *reads* it in the decaying urban landscape dominated by banners featuring clichéd Soviet pronouncements like "We wish success to the participants of the XI international festival for disarmament and nuclear security." Maralov's third-person subjective narration claims that he does not see any trace of *ukhriab* in the slogan, yet Pelevin's newly post-Soviet reader, out of habit of abbreviating longer pieces of state-sanctioned rhetoric, would readily see *ukhriab* in "*Uspekha uchastnikam XI mezhdunarodnogo festivalia za razoruzheniie i iadernuiu bezopasnost'*."⁵² Sometimes, the names of the objects surrounding Maralov appear to be in an onomatopoeic relationship with *ukhriab*, sharing a syllable or two; sometimes there are no traces of phonetic similarity. Grasping for the remnants of his sanity, Maralov theorizes that *ukhriab* is a blend (not precisely an acronym) of two Russian words, *khrebet* ("ridge", or "spine") and *ukhab* ("pothole"). The conceptual opposition of "high-

⁵² X is the letter of the Cyrillic alphabet that denotes the sound [h].

low,”⁵³ evident between the two “parts” of *ukhriab*, allows a reading of *ukhriab* as a kind of a linguistic condensation of a gap (Maralov theorizes, at one point, that *ukhriab* is a hole in his soul, but at the same time a symbol *par excellence* that is meant to cover this hole).

Tracing *ukhriab* to its possible linguistic origin, however, does not help Maralov at all. Instead, *ukhriab* is represented as a rupture in the canvas of Maralov’s life – first a crack, then a canyon, then an abyss. He sinks deeper and deeper into his obsession with *ukhriab*, reads it in more and more objects around him, and then comes to realize that he was initially mistaken: it is not that the objects turn into *ukhriab*, but instead *ukhriab* reveals itself to Maralov, formerly disguised in the shape of these objects:

[This something] ... has become an *ukhriab* and was now shining over Maralov’s inner world as a dim red flickering light. Before the dream, Maralov saw air as air, and asphalt as asphalt, but it turned out that everything around was simply a shape in which *ukhriab* temporarily molded itself – just like bronze remains bronze whether it is molded into a toy soldier, or into a cross, or into a monument to Kirov. So, there it was – a huge, immeasurable *ukhriab*, shining right through Maralov... and Maralov knew that the most important thing for him now would be to delay realizing that he, essentially, is also an *ukhriab*⁵⁴.

⁵³ See Vyacheslav Desyatov, “Viktor Pelevin mezhdu Ukhriabom i Uralom”, <http://lik.altnet.ru/Kritika/pelevin.htm>.

⁵⁴ Viktor Pelevin. “Ukhriab”, in *Vse Rasskazy* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2005), 176. “это что-то, мелькнув сначала неясной точкой где-то на периферии души, вдруг с ужасающей скоростью понеслось с самому центру личности и лопнуло там, превратившись в ухряб и осветив внутренний мир Маралова тусклым красным мерцанием,- до этого сна Маралов видел воздух как воздух, асфальт как асфальт и так далее, теперь же оказалось, что все вокруг – просто форма, в которой временно застыл ухряб,- так же, как бронза остается той же бронзой, отливаясь и в солдатика, и в крестик, и в памятник Кирову. Итак, огромный, безмерный ухряб, а в центре - просвеченный ухрябом Маралов, осознающий, что самое главное для него - удержаться от понимания того, что и он, в сущности, тоже ухряб”.

As a linguistic gap, *ukhriab* has a paradoxical potential to be an all-encompassing master signifier, as it possesses an uncanny ability to cover other linguistic gaps: when Maralov reads, *ukhriab* manifests itself in both the Russian classics, separated by space in phrases like “*dvukh riabchikov*” (“two grouses”), and in Soviet fiction, split into two by a period: “... *vozdukh. Riabaia*...” (“... air. Pockmarked...”)⁵⁵.

This ability of *ukhriab* also works on the intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic, and more importantly, emerges in the process of *reading* Pelevin’s text: in a movie theater, Maralov observes a mural depicting a mountain ash (*riabina* in Russian) with two sunflowers (*podsolnukh*) on its sides, and readily sees *ukhriab*. Of course, *ukhriab* emerges here not precisely for Maralov but for the reader who has no way of seeing what Maralov sees except by reading the words that describe the image. The reader of Pelevin’s text thus largely contributes to Maralov’s insanity by *reading* the image for him.

No matter in which direction Maralov thus “reads” the mural, *ukhriab* effectively provides a perverse continuity to seemingly disjointed symbols. Pairing sunflowers with mountain ash was often favored by the Soviet genre of still life;⁵⁶ it can be argued that *ukhriab*, seemingly only a source of Maralov’s anxiety and a symbol of the failure of language to account for the surrounding reality, nonetheless does create a perversely continuous national landscape out of the remnants of the Soviet imagery of the mural.

Ukhriab finally removes any and all distinctions between the object and its name in the protagonist’s psyche. A taxi trip is described in the following way: “The street rushed towards him – that is, for the driver it was the street, but for Maralov... he knew

⁵⁵ Ibid., 174.

⁵⁶ Aleksandr Os’merkin’s 1952 painting, “Podsolnukhi i Riabina”, is a classic representative.

what it was; on its sides were separate gray vertical *ukhriabs*, on which other *ukhriabs* were glowing, square-shaped and yellow.”⁵⁷ Maralov completes the trip to “uncover the symbol [*ukhriab*] with the help of the symbol itself,”⁵⁸ hoping to understand *ukhriab*, so to say, on its own terms. What *ukhriab* conceals is something unbearable, yet Maralov is determined to see what it is, still hoping that there is, as Jacques Lacan would put it, a metalanguage to understand a symbol that fails to “symbolize” by perverting the relationship between the signifier and the signified.

Expectedly, Maralov’s final journey ends in encountering *ukhriab*, in the form of a trench in the ground, into which Maralov promptly falls to his death, to become one with the signifier that subsumed his world.

The intuitive reading of the short story would suggest that, as the symbols of decaying Soviet landscape become *ukhriabs* in Maralov’s mind, the story is a metaphor for the late- and post-Soviet linguistic failure manifested in the disconnect between the signifier and the signified. However, the closing passage of the story suggests that it may well be a very productive linguistic failure: the protagonist “determinedly... threw away the useless big word, ready to see what was beyond it.”⁵⁹ In other words, the story explores the failure of language to account for reality, moves onto considering the possibility that there is no metalanguage, and dismisses it. This restores, for the protagonist at least, the ability of symbols to stand for something, even if this something is accessible only in death. The story is disillusioned in the linguistic sign, metaphorizing

⁵⁷ Pelevin. “Ukhriab”, (2005), 180. “Улица понеслась навстречу - улица для водителя, а для Маралова – известно что: имевшее по бокам отдельные вертикальные ухрябы серого цвета, на которых горели другие - желтые и квадратные”.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 179. “И вскрыть его надо с помощью самого этого символа, то есть ухряба”.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 182 (“А затем решительно, с размаху, повалился в яму и, как сбрасывают покрывало с памятника, отбросил ненужное большое слово, приготовясь увидеть то, что за ним”).

its detachment from the signified, but not in the mechanism of signification itself.

Ukhriab, having destroyed Maralov's psyche, turns out to be not an empty signifier but a signifier of some higher order: it denotes a transcendental meaning which, of course, "normal" language cannot hope to describe. The story ends there, seemingly deconstructing language but in fact reinforcing its magical power.

It seems that logocentrism, traditionally associated with Russian culture, intrinsically shaping literary practices⁶⁰ and predicated on the belief in the nearly magical power of language, determined the post-Soviet literary response to the collapse of both the institutional structures and aesthetic practices of Soviet literature. Post-Soviet writer, having glimpsed into the void where the signifiers lost their ability to be unquestionably matched with their signifieds, had no real means to counter this void of language but with language itself. The search for a language which will restore the chain of signification continued in post-Soviet literature even after the relationship between the signifier and the signified was shown to be irreparable (as the case of *Ukhriab* demonstrates).

Post-Soviet literature, I would argue, has seen something in the post-Soviet symbolic void that it could not live with, as none of the Soviet cultural assumptions about the role of literature carried over into the post-Soviet literary landscape. While Wachtel suggests that a radical rethinking of the role of literature in the fabric of social life could and should occur as a post-Communist society transitions to new models of cultural production, I propose that this did not precisely happen in the Russian case. Russian literature wanted to *remain* Literature with a capital L. Though the range of ideologies supporting the myth of great national literature have revealed their mythological nature in post-Soviet context, the myth itself was largely sustained as a function of cultural

⁶⁰ For a discussion of Russian logocentrism, see Conclusion to Epstein 1995.

nostalgia for the institutional status of literature, and as a cultural defense mechanism against the linguistic void.

As much as Pelevin would want one to believe that the old models of literature's functioning in Russian society are dead, his own writing suggests that this is not precisely the case. Pelevin's essay *Zombifikatsiia* ("Zombification", 1990), mentions a banner that, anecdotally, used to decorate the building of the Kazan' train station: "Communism", the banner proclaims, "is *pyzdyr maksymardysh pyzh!*" In the essay, devoted to the Soviet Union's "magical practices" that socialize the citizen into the ritualized magic of state ideology, Communism is defined as a string of nonsensical words with no grammatical relation to one another⁶¹. However, it is worth noting that the essay *does* provide a definition of Communism, even though the language responsible for the definition does not do its job. In other words, the stated goal of Soviet/Russian literary textuality, - production of profound, socially relevant meanings, - continues to be pursued, even if this production is now met with certain difficulties.

In the same essay there appears an image of "lexical impact" [*leksicheskii udar*], a peculiar feeling experienced when one is faced with the swarm of empty Soviet signifiers: "All these... terms in the Martian language produce a sensation of some inflexible, inhuman power – nothing human can be called thus."⁶² Yet, the incessant traumatic repetition of the empty, inhuman Soviet signifiers in Pelevin's own prose is also a "lexical impact" in its own right. The repetition is what validates these signifiers

⁶¹ The phonetics of the utterance are a conventionalized parody of the sounds of the Tatar language.

⁶² Viktor Pelevin, "Zombifikatsiia", online version available at <http://pelevin.nov.ru/pov/pe-zombi/2.html>. "Все эти... марсианские термины рожают ощущение какой-то непреклонной, нечеловеческой силы – ничто человеческое не может так называться".

because they are again included into the productive field of the literary text, a field whose very existence is predicated on the functionality of linguistic expression.

Nearly twenty years later, one of the characters of Pelevin's 2009 novel, *T*, will say that "the modern mind... often keeps on thinking even after having realized that it does not exist,"⁶³ effectively summing up the nature of the problem the post-Soviet writer faced as they formulated their responses to the linguistic and institutional void of post-Soviet literary landscape.

It has to be said that Wachtel's post-Communist literary pluralism is undoubtedly a feature of this landscape. The explosion of domestic genre fiction towards the mid-1990s, proliferated mainly by the younger generation of writers, attests to that. However, the heavily mythologized status of Russian national literature continued to define not just the nature of the literary innovation, but also the aesthetic and thematic inertia in the work of those newly post-Soviet writers who retained many cultural assumptions about literature formulated by generations of Russian intellectuals. As much as Pelevin (jokingly) claims to have a goal of liberating the rotting *logos* from the mouth of an intellectual, he, nonetheless, entrusts himself into its power.

Pelevin hardly has any other option; the absolute linguistic void (into which we glimpsed together with the protagonist of *Ukhriab* and were relieved to dismiss) completely denies the writer any ability to produce meaning. In the context of nearly two hundred years of socially responsible, heavily pedagogized, high-status literature, the attempts to articulate the post-Soviet void, so to say, on its own terms, like the one in *Ukhriab*, find themselves in opposition to another kind of articulation. In these attempts,

⁶³ Viktor Pelevin. *T* (Moskva: Eksmo-Press, 2009), 364. "Однако...современный ум изощрен настолько, что нередко продолжает думать, даже поняв, что его нет".

linguistic innovation is complemented by a compulsive repetition of the language that was. Just as the protagonist of *Ukhriab* attempts to cover the void produced by an empty signifier with the help of the signifier itself, the mythologized entity known as the Russian language is used in the post-Soviet literary context to mask its own apparent absence. This perverse operation aims to restore the stability of a national literary tradition by providing a self-consciously illusionary linguistic continuity. This allows the institution of national literature to face the paradigmatic shift that strips it of its former status.

Pushkin pushkinski velik: Actualizing the Classics

Russian logocentrism is largely predicated on the mythologized status of national language. Lara Ryazanova-Clarke sums it up:

The Russian language is seen as a national treasure, an encapsulation of national history and culture... Usually, language cultivation falls back on the discourse of the Great Tradition, which supports the symbolic status of the language and which is based on a set of beliefs, often of a mythological nature, about the relation of language to the history of the people. Generally, in the narrative of the Great Tradition, the past is believed to be a realm of perfection, whereas innovation is suspected of being corrupt. Evoking the image of the Golden Age of Russian language, for instance, Lyudmila Graudina writes: “[In] the Russian language... both form and content of that perfect language which we call the language of Pushkin, Blok... Dostoievskii and Tolstoi, are distorted [*narusheny*].”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Quoted in Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, “‘The Crystallization of Structures’: Linguistic Culture in Putin’s Russia”, in *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia*, Ingunn Lunde, ed. (Bergen: Slavica Bergensia, 2006), 31-64, 49. “Русская речь ведет свое существование [...] Но в ней давно

Graudina's lament of the state of national language in this passage is something to be expected; Gorham posits the necessity of some form of linguistic purism as a reaction to the linguistic experimentation characteristic of the cultures in transition⁶⁵. Linguistic purism *per se* aside, however, there is something else that is distorted in the post-Soviet treatment of the Great Tradition: its relationship with the classics themselves. This relationship is predicated on a distinctly Soviet mode of reading, not just in terms of normativity of interpretation but also in terms of the relationship between the author and their text.

Dobrenko suggests that “[T]he notion of ‘the classics’ ... in Soviet times became... the model and value standard for judging literary quality, and... reached a ‘maximal semantic purity, functionality, and inflexibility’.”⁶⁶ The mechanism through which such inflexible normativity of interpretation was possible is, of course, reading literary texts from the premise of establishing authorial intent. It seems that the decades of this mode of reading have left a pleasantly tingling scar on Russian literary culture: the writers belonging to the classical Russian canon, as Vail’ and Genis so effectively demonstrate, become indispensable characters in their text. In the process of “proper” reading, the writers acquire the agency that consistently supersedes even that of the text’s “conventional” protagonists. We remember that the Soviet reader (in Dobrenko’s rendering) had an unmatched, if perverse, creative power over the text; the extension of this power is the creation of a whole new character out of the text’s author.

нарушены и содержание, и формы того совершенного языка, который мы зовем языком Пушкина, Блока [...], Достоевского и Толстого”.

⁶⁵ Gorham 19.

⁶⁶ Dobrenko 1997, 153.

The problem with this new character in the post-Soviet context is that it should not exist, as the mode of reading supporting its creation is seemingly completely ideologically discredited. However, the “readerly power” to create literary characters perhaps proved to be tempting for post-Soviet literature. A function of the Soviet porous boundary between the reader and the writer, this distinctly “magical” power allows one to maintain a conceptual connection between literary reception and literary production, a connection no longer sustained by the institutions of literary culture.

Another of Viktor Pelevin’s early 1990s short stories provides an insight into the post-Soviet literary treatment of the classics, which points to the fetishistic mechanism of appropriating the national cultural heritage. This mechanism works, synchronically, in order to maintain a semblance of a unified field of national culture; diachronically, it manifests the desire to establish historical continuities when none are to be had.

Mardongi (“*The Mardongs*”) is a novella pretending to be a piece of cultural criticism. It analyzes the history and ideology of a religious sect in Russia in the early 1990s. The sect, headed by a spiritual leader, Nikolai Antonov, follows Tibetan spiritual teachings on life and death, summarized in the following passage:

It turns out there is no death, because it has already happened; every human carries within a so-called ‘inner corpse’, which gradually overpowers the identity. Life, according to Antonov, is not much more than being pregnant with a corpse that develops inside, like a fetus. Physical death is a final actualization of the inner corpse, and thus represents a delivery. A living human, being a fetus of a corpse, is a defective and inferior being. The corpse, on the other hand, is thought

to be the highest form of existence, for it is eternal (not physically, of course, but conceptually)⁶⁷.

Antonov's teachings are acted out in magical rituals, of which the creation of a *mardong* is the most important. A *mardong* is the actual (not the "inner") corpse of a prominent person that has to be preserved and exhibited upon death to commemorate the person's achievements.

The continuity of the eternal existence of the corpse, then, requires the adherent of Antonov's philosophy to conceptually reconcile two paradoxes. Firstly, continuity emerges in Antonov's framework only as a result of undergoing a rupture (death), a paradox that the Antonovites resolve by claiming that death should be treated as birth into eternal life. Secondly, eternal existence is achieved through the process of objectification, with the resulting object bearing little resemblance to the "original" being; this paradox is also resolved through claims of inauthenticity of the "original". The paradox of sacrificing "conventional" authenticity of the object in order to achieve an authenticity of some higher order may seem to be just a clever satirical pastiche of quasi-religious teachings⁶⁸ until Antonov's philosophy suddenly expands the notion of *mardongs*:

Antonov writes of spiritual *mardongs*, formed after the death of people who had left a significant trace in the group consciousness ... the unilateral interpretation of the words and the thoughts of the deceased [metaphorically] serves as bricks... According to Antonov, [Aleksandr] Pushkin's spiritual *mardong* was

⁶⁷ *Mardongi* is cited from: Viktor Pelevin, "Mardongi." (Viktor Pelevin - sait tvorchestva. <http://pelevin.nov.ru/rass/pe-mard/1.html> (accessed September 8, 2010)).

⁶⁸ Civil freedoms associated with *perestroika* included freedom of religion, previously guaranteed only *de jure*. The 1990s saw numerous religious and para-religious philosophies, Christian and non-Christian, competing to fill the void of religion created by the Soviet ideology. For more on this competition, along with post-Soviet "preference" for mysticism, see "Dvadsat' let religioznoi svobody v Rossii (Moskva: ROSSPEN; Moskovskii Tsentr Karnegi, 2009)(«Двадцать лет религиозной свободы в России» (М.: РОССПЭН; Московский Центр Карнеги, 2009)).

ready by the end of the 19th century, with Tchaikovskii's operas served as the final painting [of the *mardong*]. Cultural space, according to Antonov, is a Communal Grave where the spiritual *mardongs* of ideologies, masterpieces and great men repose; the presence of the living in this sphere is offensive and inadmissible...

The obvious foreignness of the concept of cultural space for the potential rank-and-file Antonovites aside (the essay even mildly discourages readers' requests to reveal the physical site of the Communal Grave), the space of Russian culture is thus infused with the paradoxical continuity discussed above. After all, even if this space is "not the culture itself, of course, but... its *mardong*," the dead greats inhabiting it are in fact *alive*, if inauthentic.

The creation of continuity out of compulsive repetition of discontinuities becomes focused once Aleksandr Pushkin comes into picture. Pushkin is often credited to be the father of modern Russian language, and his oeuvre has been, in Vail' and Genis's words, "long ago overshadowed by the image [literally, *obraz* (icon). – DK] of Pushkin himself. His writing itself has become the sole reason and the sole justification for the independent existence of this masterpiece of harmony."⁶⁹

Pushkin, then, is to be understood, so to say, *an sich*: the author and his writing conceptually merge (and become the signifier collapsing on itself). Pelevin's text provides an ironic commentary to that effect: one of the Antonovite practices is called "A talk about Pushkin" and concludes in a mantra, "Pushkin pushkinski velik" (Pushkin is

⁶⁹ Vail' and Genis 2003: 76. "Образ Пушкина давно уже затмил самого Пушкина. Его творчество стало поводом, оправданием для самостоятельного существования этого шедевра гармонии".

pushkinesquely great)⁷⁰. Pushkin[’s greatness] is explained through Pushkin’s greatness, the signified disappears as the signifier stands for itself (just as we have seen in *Ukhriab*). What remains is a possibility of language sustained by an appeal to the (fantasy of) national literary tradition. In other words, while the metaphoric connection fails (Pushkin does not stand for anything other than himself), the repetition of the signifier provides for the metonymic connection to the language itself.

Indeed, in Ryazanova-Clarke’s words, “The Pushkin myth, for almost two centuries used as a symbol of Russian national identity, has also experienced a successful transposition into [post-Soviet]... culture. The name as well as the image of Pushkin, [...] represents metonymically the Russian language itself.”⁷¹ The metonymic nature of the connection is acutely felt in Tatiana Tolstaia’s *The Slynx* (1999), where, in the post-apocalyptic Moscow, a group of intellectuals, in an attempt to “preserve the spiritual heritage”, persuades the unwilling protagonist to carve out an idol to represent Pushkin⁷². The naïve protagonist, Benedikt, born after the apocalypse which wiped out modern Russian culture and threw the country back to feudalism, fails to understand the reason to memorialize a person he has never heard about. He asks his mentor about Pushkin’s

⁷⁰ The source of the mantra is Vladimir Mayakovskii’s misquotation of Russian ego-futurist poet Igor’ Severyanin. Severyanin’s 1923 volume, *Nightingale* (Solovei), includes a poem titled “Pushkin”, with the final stanza: “Пушай он стар для современья, / Но современье для него / Ничтожно: ведь его мгновенье - / Прекрасней века моего!” (He [Pushkin] may be old for the modern age/ But the modern age is for him / Just nothing... etc.). Mayakovskii (intentionally?) misquoted this stanza in his 1930 speech to the Moscow Krasnaya Presnia Komsomol organization, where he quoted the poem as: “Да, Пушкин мертв для современья, / Но Пушкин пушкински велик” (“Yes, Pushkin’s dead for the modern age / But Pushkin’s *pushkinesquely* great!”). Mayakovskii, then, “kills off” Pushkin where Severyanin only saw slight redundancy. (See: Fond “Fundamental’naia Elektronnaia Biblioteka”. Vladimir Mayakovskii. “Vystupleniie v dome komsomola Krasnoi Presni na vechere, posviaschennom dvadtsatiletiiu deiatel’nosti” (<http://feb-web.ru/feb/mayakovsky/texts/ms0/msc/msc-422-.htm>). Fundamental’naia Elektronnaia Biblioteka: Russkaia Literatura i Folklor. (Фундаментальная Электронная Библиотека: Литература и Фольклор. Владимир Маяковский. “Выступление в доме комсомола Красной Пресни на вечере, посвященном двадцатилетию деятельности”).

⁷¹ Ryazanova-Clarke 49.

⁷² In the novel, the idol is meant to replace the famous “Opekushin’s Pushkin,” a monument to the poet erected on Strastnaia Square in Moscow in 1880 and, in the novel, ostensibly destroyed in the apocalypse.

significance and the answer he receives is, as per the Russian intellectual tradition, “Pushkin is our everything.”⁷³

In *The Slynx*, then, Pushkin too is an empty signifier – here, it stands not for itself like in *The Mardongs*, but for everything else. Just how empty this signifier is becomes apparent when Benedikt dutifully carves out “the pushkin” (now even being denied capitalization of the last name). Six-fingered, legless, Pushkin is erected in someone’s modest vegetable patch, and the birds promptly cover the idol with their droppings, while the inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic Moscow are perplexed as to the reasons why anyone would want to waste their time on memorializing something that has no significance.

Such perverse memorializations of Pushkin, as a *mardong* in Pelevin or as a wooden idol in Tolstaia, lend themselves to a question: do these texts satirize the Russian myth of the classics which used to be reinforced in the Soviet era by the prescriptive normativity of interpretation? They certainly seem to do so, exposing the reproduced images of Pushkin to be simulacra, copies whose original is inaccessible if not precisely nonexistent; the *mardong* of Pushkin reveals that what Vail’ and Genis’s “Pushkin image” covers is not the meaning of the myth, but its lack.

Lyudmila Parts reads a range of post-Soviet texts that use the “image of Pushkin” to critique late and post-Soviet cultural reality:

Each text centers on an attempt ... to make a symbolic break to [Pushkin] through the layers of ideological gloss... All of these attempts invariably fail, and instead

⁷³ Literally: “Пушкин-наше всё”. This particular oft-repeated mantra comes out of a real Soviet high-school-literature formula.

of ‘the living Pushkin’ the characters are left with various versions of a
“mummy”: a ghost, a death mask, a blurred photograph, a monument.⁷⁴

This conclusion certainly suggests that the master signifier of the national literary tradition, Pushkin, may have lost most of its signification power for the post-Soviet attempts to define contemporary social reality. However, what does the persistent attempt to decorate the post-Soviet literary landscape with the *mardongs* of the classics mean, then?

Some arguments propose that post-Soviet literature’s irreverence towards the national literary heritage is a reaction to the “centuries of logocentrism.”⁷⁵ The persistent references to classical heritage seem to evidence the crisis of the author, which, as Wachtel would have it, is indeed a feature of any post-Communist literary landscape. Yet, the Russian canon writers (Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov) nonetheless⁷⁶ constitute the “persistent myth of Great Russian Literature,”⁷⁷ an entrancing, bewitching⁷⁸ symbolic cache. Russian classics

matter not as authors of actual works...; as cult figures, these writers are nothing but symbolic entities by and through which culture identifies itself and on which it relies to assure its identity and continuity... During the periods of cultural instability, cult names served as pivotal figures who ensured the unity of culture.

⁷⁴ Lyudmila Parts, *The Chekhovian Intertext: Dialogue with a Classic*. 2 ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 29

⁷⁵ Epstein 1995, 328.

⁷⁶ Parts 11.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁸ Aleksandr Ageev, “Conspectus of the crisis: Sociocultural Conditions and the Literary Process”, in *Re-Entering the Sign: Articulating New Russian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 170-189, 176, quoted in Parts 12.

New texts congregated around them and created a productive field between texts, allowing for interaction among writers of different epochs.⁷⁹

In other words, while the attempts to articulate the *contemporary* social reality through the master signifiers of national literary tradition fail in post-Soviet texts, the persistent references to cult Russian writers in post-Soviet texts can be read as enabling post-Soviet literature to (re)establish a *diachronic* unity of the national literary field. However purposefully inauthentic this particular continuity may have become⁸⁰, we have argued that, for literature, an evidently empty signifier is always better than the absence of any possibility of signification.

How is this “reaching out” to the classics accomplished? The classic approach to the issue of intertextuality considers the ways in which the author’s text enters into a dialogue with other texts. However, the persistent model of the national literary field, with its peculiar distribution of the creative agency, the model shaped by the cultural memory of the porous Soviet boundary between the writer, the reader, and the literary character, complicates the Bakhtinian dialogic intertextuality. It is a surprisingly monologic dialogue, as the post-Soviet texts address the symbolic entities of the Russian classics, the master signifiers of national literary tradition who they know are already dead, having become *mardongs*.

The illusion of dialogue with the classics, a dialogue which does not imply a response, is connected to the peculiarities of the Soviet mode of reading. Of course, post-Soviet writers read their classics; however, the Soviet reader, not really interested in reading the author’s text because he was busy creating his own, shines through the

⁷⁹ Parts 7.

⁸⁰ Post-Soviet texts, after all, have to “reach out” to the classics through another constructed gap in the national literary tradition, created by the Soviet period.

following (post-Soviet) description of the role of Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin* (1825-32) in Russian public consciousness:

We all live with our personal *Eugene Onegin* – and it is an intimate relationship [...] Everything is known about this novel, and in fact *it is not necessary to read it* [italics mine. – DK] – it is with us even without reading, in the form of countless quotes, be that on the level of the language itself, or on the level of the image or an idea.⁸¹

If “reaching out” to the classics does not even mean reading them, how does intertextuality, in a sense of a stylistic and thematic dialogue with other *texts*, work for post-Soviet literature? What is the *mardong* of Pushkin: an intertextual reference, a metaphor for the current state of Russian literature, or something else altogether? Does the persistent post-Soviet return to the grotesquely distorted, inauthentic Pushkin signify disillusionment in the myth of the Great Literature or an attempt to reinforce it?

We remember that Pelevin has “successfully” resolved the issue of a *mardong*'s inauthenticity, and indeed the issue of its post-mortem existence itself. This post-Soviet Pushkin may be dead and inauthentic to a casual (positivist) observer, but the counterintuitive philosophy outlined in *The Mardongs* does not deny symbolic value to empty signifiers—it just learns to work around this emptiness to create its own mythological structure. It is able to do so by blurring the boundary between the writer and the literary character, actualizing in the text the conceptual transition characteristic, as Dobrenko suggests, of Socialist Realist aesthetics. Pushkin the writer becomes Pushkin the character, and there is a good reason for it: Vail' and Genis, for example, explaining

⁸¹Vail' and Genis 2003:81. “Все мы живем со своим личным “Евгением Онегиным” -- вполне интимно. Все известно про этот роман, и на самом деле читать его совершенно не обязательно: и без того он с нами в виде бесчисленных словесных, образных, идейных цитат.”

what “Pushkin” is, or at least should be, for the post-Soviet reader, propose to read a tome of Pushkin’s poetry as a narrative of the protagonist’s evolution⁸². Of course, the process of reading is thus metaphorized. However, this is yet another problematic metaphor, as Russian cult authors become characters of Vail’ and Genis’s own book, of the metatext of Russian literary tradition, thereby attesting to the persistence of the Soviet legacy in the ways post-Soviet culture conceptualizes the relationship between the writer, the reader, and the character. Why would both post-Soviet fiction and criticism want Pushkin, along with other Russian cult authors, to become characters, to repeat the path outlined for them by Socialist Realist aesthetics?

The Soviet reader, as we remember, was an idealistic, demanding creature. He looked to literature for answers but the *text* he read meant little in comparison with the text he created through the process of reading. Reading Russian classics through the Soviet interpretative lens made this reader into the post-Soviet writer.

Vladimir Sorokin’s *Blue Lard*: Russian Literature as a Textual Laboratory.

In 2002, the activists of a pro-Putin youth organization, “Iduschiie Vmeste” (“Marching Together”), organized an infamous political event in Teatral’naia Square in Moscow that bore all features of an avant-garde happening, complete with Duchamp references. The group unveiled an installation, consisting of a foam plastic model of a toilet bowl, and proceeded to fill it with brochures containing quotes from Vladimir Sorokin’s 1999 novel *Goluboi Salo (Blue Lard)* soaked in chlorine bleach. In the course

⁸² Vail’ and Genis 2003:68-69. “И если читать эту книгу... в хронологическом порядке, то мы обнаружим в ней один из самых сложных и увлекательных романов русской литературы. Черты классического романа этой книге придает естественная последовательность -- от рождения поэта до его смерти. Эволюция главного героя -- тема книги. От страницы к странице меняется герой, а вместе с ним и форма, в которой запечатлены эти перемены”.

of the legal battle between “Iduschiie Vmeste” and Sorokin that followed this symbolic cleansing of the post-Soviet literary landscape, “Iduschiie” alleged that the novel contained obscenity and pornography and attempted to have it banned. The “pornographic” episode “Iduschiie” mentioned in their lawsuit is a relatively short (for Sorokin, at least) graphic description of a sexual act between two characters named Stalin and Khrushchev. Though the characters bear little resemblance, physical or otherwise, to the historical Stalin and Khrushchev in Sorokin’s phantasmatic alternative history of Russia, there is little doubt that the young Russian nationalists were unhappy not precisely with the graphic sex but with Sorokin’s political “audacity” that ran against the Putin government’s effort to put a stop to the widespread “desecration” of Soviet symbols underway in 1990s.

The novel contains equally controversial, episodes of child rape and elaborate sexualized torture; furthermore, Sorokin’s prose featured taboo vocabulary and explicit descriptions of sexual acts for quite some time before *Blue Lard*. However, the *Blue Lard* scandal was significant in that it illuminated a kind of a “reverse shift” of the role of literature in the post-Soviet consciousness. One single book, again, could hold the public imagination, even if it happened via “pornography’s” engagement with ideology (to borrow from Eliot Borenstein)⁸³. Sorokin’s “pornography” of the 1990s was not yet able to do the trick; his infamous *Tridtsataia Lyubov’ Mariny* (*Marina’s Thirtieth Love*, 1982-84, first published in Russia in 1995) hardly produced any public outcry. Putting Stalin and Khrushchev in bed together in the early 2000s, however, led to a paradoxical effect: the very dense, if beautifully so, experimental novel acquired an unexpectedly large

⁸³ See Eliot Borenstein, “Stripping the Nation Bare: Russian Pornography and the Insistence on Meaning”, in *International Exposure : Perspectives on Modern European Pornography, 1800-2000*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004. Ed. Lisa Z. Sigel, 232- 255, 234.

audience⁸⁴, cementing Sorokin's status as a cult Russian writer, a status he continues to openly resist in his numerous interviews.

The plot of *Blue Lard*, too, resists summarizing, but can be generally outlined: in the future, somewhere in the northeast of what used to be Russia, a group of scientists are locked in a secret laboratory. The narrator, Boris Gloger, a self-described "biophilologist", explains in letters to his young male lover that he is responsible for an important part of the experiment: the research group clones Russian writers. The clones then enter a "script-process," during which they ostensibly produce clones of the classic texts. The researchers, however, are not interested in these texts; they are after blue lard, which deposits in the clones' bodies after they finish writing. Blue lard, complex quasi-scientific explanations suggest, promises eternal life and potentially allows solving the problem of perpetual motion.

The first narrative break occurs when the narrator is killed: the narration shifts from first to third person as the lab is destroyed (and blue lard stolen) by a nationalist religious sect of Zemleioy ("Earthfuckers"). A description of the history of the sect and its entertaining magical practices follows, while the sect leaders decide to send blue lard to the past. The Earthfuckers want the magical substance to end in the hands of the 20th century Soviet government.

Another narrative break occurs, and the reader is transported into a perversely decadent version of Stalinist Russia, complete with the Khrushchev/Stalin scene, cocaine snorting and pedophilia. Stalin's best friend in this universe is Hitler, who expresses a desire to partake in the use of blue lard. After several plot twists, Stalin battles Hitler for the last remaining syringe of lard extract. The syringe pierces Stalin's eye and the lard is

⁸⁴ By 2009, at least four editions of *Blue Lard* were published.

injected directly into his brain, making it grow larger than the universe itself. Yet another narrative break, and Stalin (a “different” Stalin) wakes up as a servant to the young man who was Boris Gloger’s addressee in the opening part of the novel.

The plot of *Blue Lard* is entertaining, not just ironically commenting on Soviet history, but also tickling the (Russian) reader’s fascination with taboo subjects and language. Sorokin’s prose is a little too experimental to be a bestseller, however. Characterizations like “nasiliie nad iazykom” (literally, “violence over language”) and “blowing the text up with a blast of narrative”⁸⁵ abound in critical responses to Sorokin’s prose. Before the reader gets to the infamous sex scene in the middle of *Blue Lard*, then, they would have to deal with a staggering amount of linguistic experimentation in the midst of a protean narration.

The Russian language of the future in *Blue Lard* is a mix of Russian, German, Chinese and English, topped with invented and outright incomprehensible words⁸⁶. Sorokin is kind enough to provide two separate glossaries (one for Chinese words, another for “all other words and expressions”) in the appendix, but, of the five opening lines of the novel, each already features one or two neologisms and/or non-Russian words, tucked between oxymorons and unexpected paragraph breaks. Ingunn Lunde argues that the mixture of different linguistic elements in *Blue Lard* is “a kind of commentary on the language situation in Russia today.”⁸⁷ We have touched on the

⁸⁵ Viktor Erofeev, “Russkie Tsvety Zla”, in *Russkie Tsvety Zla: Sbornik*, ed. V. Erofeev (Moscow, 1997), 7-30, 10-12: “[Sorokin is] the leading monster of the new Russian literature.. he blows them [the texts] up with a blast of narrative”. Quoted in Dirk Uffelmann, “Led tronulsia: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin’s Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism” in *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Bergen: Slavica Bergensia, 2008). 100-126, 102.

⁸⁶ As Ingunn Lunde shows in her reading of the novel. See: Ingunn Lunde, “Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia: The Response of Literature”, in *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Bergen: Slavica Bergensia, 2008), 64-80, 68.

⁸⁷ Lunde 69.

challenges the Russian language faced when the formulaic Soviet discourse failed to support the production of meaning. It may seem, then, that *Blue Lard* indulges in a linguistic experiment, so to say, with a purely mimetic purpose: in a classic dystopian move, the novel outlines the present state of national language through a temporal displacement. To continue with this line of thought, the novel's deconstruction of classic narrative conventions may indeed even be a similarly negative commentary on the present state of Russian literature.

However, while it is tempting to read the novel as a lament of the state of national language and literature, it seems that *Blue Lard* also offers a strong protection to the seemingly disintegrating Russian language by shaping it in the form of a novel, however distorted this form may have become. Lunde notes that

[I]n Sorokin's novel... the limits, challenges and potentials of language are investigated within a closed linguistic environment... in Sorokin's literary universe there are no problems of communication between the characters, while **the reader** is constantly challenged by non-comprehension and the potential meaningless of what he or she is reading⁸⁸.

In other words, *within the novel*, and on its own terms, there is nothing wrong with the [Russian] language. It is only when the reader comes into picture that Sorokin's "textual violence" becomes apparent.

The reader, then, is an indispensable component of Sorokin's "method," which may at the first glance seem to purposefully ignore the reader to indulge in the pure artistry of linguistic experimentation. The shifts in the narrative perspective, and the incomprehensibilities resulting from the linguistic combinations and narrative breaks,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 70.

paradoxically, *create* the reader by demanding a response from them. Rajendra Chitnis, examining the narrative breaks in Sorokin, suggests that

Sorokin's writing may be understood as an attempt to restore to literature Roland Barthes's notion of *jouissance*... Barthes argues that the pleasure of reading... 'proceeds from certain breaks...' resulting from the redistribution of language⁸⁹... [Breaks in Sorokin's texts] seek to teach this hesitation, a sudden awareness of helplessness...⁹⁰.

In Chitnis's analysis, the novel takes a pedagogical function: it shapes and molds the reader, demanding that the reader possesses an agency, even if it manifests in an emotional response like that of "Iduschiie Vmeste", thoroughly disgusted by the grotesque blend of ideology and pornography. *Blue Lard*, thus shaped to elicit reader's response, makes (concerned) citizens out of "Iduschiie". While creating the reader through making the process of reading difficult may seem a complete ideological and stylistic break from the principles of Soviet art, the Socialist Realist mode of *producing* state readers is thus paradoxically re-launched.

Dobrenko describes concerned Soviet readers who demanded "more realism," or simpler language, in their letters to the publishers. The *Blue Lard* scandal convincingly demonstrates that just such a concerned "Soviet reader" became possible again, rising from Sorokin's post-Soviet linguistic abyss. Though the path towards (re)making the Russian reader was increasingly circuitous in Sorokin's case, within the linguistic ruptures of *Blue Lard* there lives a nostalgic desire to have the kind of literature which

⁸⁹ Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russian and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech and Slovak fiction of the Changes, 1988-1998* (BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 127.

⁹⁰ Chitnis 129.

elicits response, and which overcomes the post-Soviet reader's passivity outlined by the Levada report - even if literature has to drastically change its methods to achieve this effect.

In Chitnis's reading, the violated reader experiences hesitation because of the narrative and linguistic breaks, thus emerging as a paradoxical subject who acquires power by being rendered helpless. In Sorokin's prose, however, not just Sorokin's *own* text produces this paradoxical subject: textuality in general seems to have this kind of power, as Sorokin appropriates other "texts" to expose the breaks in conventionalized, "classic" textuality.

To explore the issue, let us go back to the clones of Russian writers diligently producing blue lard in the underground lab. Appropriately for the dystopian, magical set-up, there are seven clones: Tolstoy-4; Chekhov-3; Nabokov-7; Pasternak-1; Dostoevsky-2; Akhmatova-2; and Platonov-3. Tended to by Boris Gloger and the rest of the staff, the clones perform their "script-process,"⁹¹ and promptly hibernate to produce the lard. The texts they produce are seemingly a mere byproduct⁹² of the operation⁹³.

The texts the clones produce have been popularly read as a stylistic deconstruction of Russian classics⁹⁴. Dostoevsky-2, for example, produces a text titled "Count Reshetovskii", appropriately set in that gloomy version of St. Petersburg which appears across (the original) Dostoevsky's texts so often that it has come to be popularly

⁹¹ The term used to describe writing seemingly eliminates any traces of creativity from the practice.

⁹² For a representative reading of this kind, see Dirk Uffelmann, "Led tronulsia: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin's Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism" in *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Bergen: Slavica Bergensia, 2008), 100-126.

⁹³ As evident in Boris's businesslike attitude when he sends the texts to his lover, to be kept in a "script collection" Boris maintains.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., Erich Poyntner. *Anderswelt: Zur Struktur Der Phantastik in Der Russischen Literatur Des 20 Jahrhunderts (Europäische Hochschulschriften: Reihe 16, Slawische Sprachen)*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

known as “Dostoevsky’s Petersburg.” The arrival of two visitors to Count Reshetovskii’s mansion culminates in a scene where the numerous characters experience a range of extreme emotions as a reaction to the Count’s proposition to spiritually unify humankind by physically sewing the humans together. This amusing (and disturbing) scene is a parody of numerous Dostoevskian scenes that explore the interactions between sublime emotions and human irrationality, most notably the money-burning scene in *The Idiot* (1868).

Not just the plot, but the style too becomes the subject of the parody in Sorokin. The disjointed dialogue, unexpected movements of the characters, narration going on tangents, complex sentence structure, italicizing, as well as indirectly addressing the reader by adding a polite postposition to the end of the sentence, all parodically exaggerate the distinctive features of Dostoevsky’s narrative style.

The text that emerges from this exaggeration is undoubtedly disturbing: it provides little context to the characters’ emotions, and is confusingly catachrestic. One of the Count’s visitors has a “dead, yet extensively long snake” as a belt; ever-expanding metaphors exhaust themselves in repetition: people flock to the Count’s famous receptions “like bees to the beehive, yes, like little swift fussy bees to a new, sturdy beehive, though beehives can be of different structure there are ones that look like houses...,yessir” etc.⁹⁵ It seems that the stylized “Dostoevskian” language is thus recreated to bring it down: none of the features of Dostoevsky’s style are left unattended

⁹⁵ Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboi Salo*, in Vladimir Sorokin. *Sobranie Sochinenii v trekh tomakh*. Tom 3 (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 2002), 7-302, 33. “[К]ак пчелы к улью, да, как проворные, хлопотливые пчелки к новому, добротнo обделанному улью хотя ульи имеют разную конструкцию есть колоды есть домики и бортъ и земляные ульи-с”.

to, and each, as if deliberately, presents a frustration as to either its role as an element of the narrative, or to its very meaning.

The clones' texts have been thus read as a deconstruction of the type of textuality associated with the Russian classics.⁹⁶ Indeed, the parodic texts blow up the smoothness of Tolstoy's narrative when Tolstoy-4's text compulsively recreates the characteristically Tolstoian sprawling description of a hunt – the digression from the “original” being that the 19th-century Russian aristocracy in the clone's text uses serfs instead of hounds. Or, the harmony of poetic sublimity is deconstructed when Pasternak-1's poem turns out to feature not (the original) Pasternak's favorite image, a star, but a cunt, based on the phonetic similarity of the two Russian words.

Does “Sorokin [feed] ... on authoritative discourses,”⁹⁷ as Mark Lipovetsky suggests? Does this de(con)structive parodying represent a radical breakdown of the “classic” textuality by stripping it of dignified authority, or by demonstrating through exaggerated, yet surprisingly faithful, stylistic imitation that the classic masterpieces of mythologized textual harmony are not (and never were) in any way “harmonious?” Of course; yet, if we consider that the classic *texts* in our analysis of post-Soviet engagement with the classic legacy so far mattered less than the mythologized entities of the classic writers themselves, we can argue that Sorokin's deconstruction of the classics' style(s) has a paradoxical effect.

⁹⁶ Poyntner 111-112.

⁹⁷ Mark Lipovetskii. “Goluboi salo pokoleniia, ili dva mifa ob odnom krizise.” Online version available at: <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/lipovetskiy.shtml>. “Классики русского модернизма подверглись канонизации только в последние годы, обросли мифами и легендами, стали героями школьных сочинений. А значит — созрели для Сорокина, который питается авторитетностью и ничем другим”.

The string of catachreses in Dostoevsky-2's text (the device that seems to be favored by the rest of the clones, too) creates incomprehensibilities in the text, but instead of reading the deconstruction of the "metaphoric ability" of classic textuality as a symptom of the post-Soviet breakdown of the myth of Russian literature, we may read it, in view of the resurrection of the engaged reader in Sorokin, as something else entirely. Valentin Asmus, the Soviet critic who was instrumental in theorizing the aesthetic paradigm of the Soviet art, maintained that "what is called 'incomprehensibility' in art is perhaps simply an inexact name for reader laziness... his lack of desire to exert himself."⁹⁸ This notion, which shaped the idealized, sacrificial nature of Soviet reading, is picked up by Sorokin's text. The amount of exertion required of the reader of Sorokin is staggering, but out of it, paradoxically, emerge the distilled versions of Russian classic textualit(ies).

The peculiarities of Dostoevsky's style *emerge* from Sorokin's parody precisely because the clone's text magnifies the elements of Dostoevsky's style, and reactualizes these elements by making them visible in the text which, as we have seen, already demands the reader's undivided attention. This insistent reconstruction achieved through estrangement, then, reinvests the *text* with significance. Sorokin explains what Dostoevsky's text is by showing what it is not.

The classical texts mutate in the dystopian setting of the novel, metaphorizing post-Soviet literature's necessity to mutate in the (in its own way post-apocalyptic) post-Soviet context. This mutation is a complex reaction to the Soviet aesthetics of reception, which froze Russian classical texts into their respective fixed interpretations. The

⁹⁸ Quoted in Dobrenko 1997: 17-18.

classical texts became frozen words, just like the words Pantagruel throws to his companions in an episode from Rabelais that is an epigraph to *Blue Lard*:

He then threw us on the deck whole handfuls of frozen words, which seemed to us like your rough sugar-plums, of many colours... and when we had somewhat warmed them between our hands, they melted like snow, and we really heard them, but could not understand them, for it was a barbarous gibberish.⁹⁹

While it might seem that the classic texts become in *Blue Lard* “barbarous gibberish”, deconstructed and stripped of meaning, a byproduct of blue lard, the epigraph to *Blue Lard* also metaphorizes a concurrent process: Sorokin’s text, in a way, “melts” the fixed interpretations, allowing the reader to “hear” the Russian classics again.

Mark Lipovetsky argues, in conjunction with Sorokin’s treatment of the clichés of Soviet discourse, that

In ... Sorokin’s works...two parallel processes occur simultaneously: the *remythologization of the discourse*, the reconstruction of its ritual semantics, is combined with the consequent revelation of the discourse’s contradictions – in a word, with the *deconstruction of the discourse*, which brings it into a state of absurdity of complete chaos. But since both of these parallel processes take place simultaneously, the result of any text by Sorokin is the *mythology of the absurd*.¹⁰⁰

Transferring this argument to Sorokin’s treatment of another authoritative textuality compromised in the post-Soviet context - the classical literary heritage - we

⁹⁹ The epigraph to *Blue Lard* is taken from Chapter LVI, Book Four of Francois Rabelais, *Gargantua and His Son Pantagruel*, quoted here from Francois Rabelais, *Gargantua and His Son Pantagruel* (Project Gutenberg) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1200/1200-h/p4.htm#2HCH0055>.

¹⁰⁰ See Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue With Chaos* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 214-15.

may argue that Sorokin's own text accomplishes what the "frozen" classics themselves failed to accomplish. It insists that while the mythologized status of Russian literature is challenged by a variety of social and aesthetic factors, literature remains a functional medium, if not precisely for meaning-production, then at least for production of the mythological "textual magic." This magic is promptly conserved in the controlled environment of the laboratory (and, by extension, in the environment of the (literary) text of *Blue Lard* itself), preserved in Boris Gloger's "script collection," and substantiated in the metaphor of the magical blue lard¹⁰¹.

Blue Lard is another example of post-Soviet "literary fetishism." The novel knows very well, and does not conceal the fact, that literature can no longer be what it used to be: a universal frame of reference; a powerful avenue of identity production. However, the desire for these kinds of myths is evident in that, for deconstructing these myths, Sorokin appeals to, and makes use of, the Soviet model of literary production and reception. Gleb Shul'piakov discusses the violence *Blue Lard* inflicts on the myth of Russian literature, suggesting that

[Sorokin proves] that even after all his experiments [Russian literature] remains alive. It turns out that Russian literature is still "fireproof": it's just that in the present conditions it needs a new method of tempering... *Blue Lard* is a novel about how the steel was tempered, [tempering Russian literature as] the steel.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ For the detailed discussion of Sorokin's substantiation of metaphors in *Blue Lard*, see Dirk Uffelmann, "Led tronulsia: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin's Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism" in *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Bergen: Slavica Bergensia, 2008), 100-126, esp. 115.

¹⁰² Gleb Shul'piakov, "Potselui menya v zvezdy", <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/shulp.shtml>. "Что делает с [русской литературой] Владимир Сорокин? Доказывает, что даже после всех его экспериментов она остается живой. Оказывается, что русская литература все также огнеупорна: просто в нынешних условиях ей требуется новый метод закаливания..." "Голубое сало" - роман о том, как закалялась сталь, где в роли металла выступает великая русская".

Here, Shul'piakov notes an unmistakably Socialist Realist aesthetic at work in Sorokin's experimentation. He compares the novel to the epitome of Socialist Realism, Ostrovskii's *How the Steel Was Tempered*, which, as we have seen, provided a model for the interaction of literary production and reception for Socialist Realism. Sorokin's avant-garde experiments with literary language, conventions, and heritage in *Blue Lard*, while representing a radical break with Socialist Realist aesthetics on the formal level, nonetheless conceptualize the interaction between the reader and the text in a way that is surprisingly similar to the Socialist Realist model.

On the one hand, by illuminating Russian classic textuality through its deconstruction, *Blue Lard* mocks the mode of reading the classics installed by the Soviet pedagogized aesthetics of reception, where the "ideological enjoyment," filtered through the mythologized author figure, proscribed enjoying the language and the style, the enjoyment of reading the author's *text*.

Yet, on the other hand, while the novel thus "depedagogizes" the fixed interpretations of the classics, it does so through proscribing the reader's access to the "authentic" classical text. Just as the Soviet aesthetics of reception allowed the reader to effectively ignore the author's text to create his own, Sorokin's text makes the reader *not* read the classics, again. Sorokin, rather violently, hijacks the creative agency from the congealed symbolic authority of the classics. The reader, of course, ends up reading not Dostoevsky, but Sorokin, who comes to complete, metaphorically, the Soviet "hermeneutic circle" of production and reception. A diligent reader of the Russian classics (as evident from the beautiful stylistic mimicry of the parodies), Sorokin demands of the classics that which they can no longer offer in post-Soviet context, that is,

symbolic authority. In a way, Sorokin thus “becomes” a writer by taking it onto himself to shape and mold the reader through linguistic and narrative experimentation, and by sustaining, if perversely, the mythologized status of Russian literature.

The ambivalent treatment of the symbolic authority of the writer in *Blue Lard* elucidates the reasons for Sorokin’s emphatic denial of his cult status. On the one hand, literary textuality, as we have seen, is reinvested in the novel if not with conventional symbolic authority, then at least with the power to influence the reader’s mind. The classical texts are to be preserved in Boris Gloger’s collection, even if they had to undergo a drastic mutation to be perversely re-actualized for the reader. On the other hand, however, the figure of the author himself becomes in Sorokin’s text yet another *mardong*, a speechless lab monster described, in the case of Dostoevsky-2, as “a specimen of indeterminate gender, of medium height and with pathology of chest development.”¹⁰³

What do we make of this “split” of symbolic authority? Textuality itself reacquires it as a result of Sorokin’s experimentation; the figures of the authors are, conversely, stripped of it. The “alternative Stalinist Moscow” segment of the novel features characters with names AAA (easily recognizable as Anna Andreevna Akhmatova), Osip (Mandel’shtam), and Iosif (Joseph Brodsky). The culmination of the plot line (complete with drinking urine, yelling obscenities and others of Sorokin’s shock-value favorites) occurs when AAA gives birth to a mysterious black egg, to be swallowed by the “next big poet.”

¹⁰³ Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboi Salo*, in Vladimir Sorokin. *Sobranie Sochinenii v trekh tomakh*. Tom 3 (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 2002), 7-302, 22. “Особь неопределенного пола, среднего роста, с патологией грудной клетки”.

A number of children, recognizable as 1960s Soviet poets Robert (Rozhdestvenskii) and Zhenya (Evgenii Evtushenko) among them, fail to swallow the disgusting object, and AAA laments that “the golden chain will be broken... and you won’t know what the stars are,”¹⁰⁴ in a mocking reference to trite metaphors used to describe the continuity of Russian poetic tradition. Another child, Iosif (Brodsky)—in Sorokin’s depiction an excessively unpleasant young man — manages to swallow the egg and is envied by the rest of the phantasmatic poetic circle.¹⁰⁵

The episode is as physiologically detailed and disgusting as it is elucidative of Sorokin’s ambivalent treatment of the writer’s symbolic authority. What do the acid pastiches of this group of (Soviet) writers,¹⁰⁶ and the fact that none of them merited a parody of their texts, mean? Certainly the parodies of the *texts* of some Russian canon writers in Sorokin still can potentially be read as (dialogically) intertextual references, signifying that post-Soviet literature cannot quite let go of the mythological riches of the Russian/Soviet literary heritage. Yet how do we deal with the symbolic entities of the writers who are thrown outside of the field of conventional intertextuality by being made into stick-characters, their connections with their texts irreparably severed?

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboi Salo*, in Vladimir Sorokin. *Sobranie Sochinenii v trekh tomakh*. Tom 3 (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 2002), 7-302, 217. “Разорвется цепь золотая... Будете прыгать по земле, как блохи, и не знать, что такое звезды...”

¹⁰⁵ The episode mockingly metaphorizes the circle of young poets who congregated around Anna Akhmatova in her later years, and the symbolic “transfer of the poetic lyre” from the older poet of national stature to the younger. The “transfer of the lyre” is modeled on the famous episode of Russian literary history, popularized by Yurii Tynianov’s fictionalized biography of a German-Russian romantic poet, Wil’helm Kukhel’beker, *Kukhlia* (1925). In the novel, the Russian classicist poet, Gavriil Derzhavin, comes to a poetry recital in St. Petersburg Lyceum where adolescent Aleksandr Pushkin is a student. Upon listening to Pushkin reading his own poems (and running away in embarrassment), Derzhavin cries and goes to look for Pushkin, which the subjective narration from Kukhel’beker’s perspective interprets as the “transfer of the lyre.” In *Blue Lard*, Anna Akhmatova’s relationship with Joseph Brodsky and her continuous support during Brodsky’s trial and exile is interpreted as such symbolic “transfer of the lyre.”

¹⁰⁶ Mark Lipovetsky suggests that this group was “canonized” relatively recently, thus entering the cultural space where Sorokin “feeds on authority.” See: Mark Lipovetskii. “Goluboi salo pokoleniia, ili dva mifa ob odnom krizise.” Online version available at: <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/lipovetskiy.shtml>.

To trace the issue, we will need to go back to the “clone text” which stands out from the rest: while all of the clone texts are relatively faithful stylistic parodies, this one is not. The clone of Anna Akhmatova, Akhmatova-2, produces two pastiches of Akhmatova poems, and then another text, a sprawling Soviet folk ballad.¹⁰⁷ The source of the poem is one of the forgotten masterpieces of Soviet folklore, the Tatar ballad “In the Spring of 1930” (“V tridsatyi god vesnoi”), narrating an all-too-familiar¹⁰⁸ story of collectivization and martyrdom: a pro-collectivization woman is murdered by the *kulaks*, the criminals are brought to justice, and the Soviet collective farm workers triumph. The broken iambic foot, the unusually long (for poetry in Russian) lines and couplet rhyming produce an entrancing effect, which Sorokin’s parody picks up, magnifying the ritualistic modality of folk poetry and making visible the structure(s) of symbolic authority upon which Soviet mythology relies.

In the “clone poem”, set against the background of 1930s collectivization, three female Tatar collective farm workers plead with the local Party official, Comrade Akhmat, to help them against the village’s wealthy *kulaks*, who wish to interfere with the women’s plans to build a school. Comrade Akhmat helps the women; grateful, they spend the night with him, in due course giving birth to three sons. The narrative continues, interspersed by poetic interjections: the sons, each named Akhmat, become

¹⁰⁷ For a thorough survey of Stalinist folk ballads, see Frank J. Miller, *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era* (New York: M.E. Sharps, 1991). The ballad in question was published in Russian translation in the 1937 volume *Folk Arts of the Peoples of the USSR (Tvorchestvo narodov SSSR)*, edited by Maksim Gor’kii himself and commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Revolution of 1917. “V tridsatyi god vesnoi...”, in *Tvorchestvo narodov SSSR*, M. Gor’kii, ed. (Moskva: Izdatel’svo redaktsii “Pravdy”, (1937?)), 408-409.

¹⁰⁸ The most famous of the collectivization inspirational tragedies, the murder of a youth (Pavlik Morozov) in Tavda, Siberia, was fictionalized in Vitalii Gubarev’s 1933 short novel, *Pavlik Morozov*. Morozov was killed, in the official version, by his relatives who detested the fact the youth supported collectivization. Morozov became an (ethically suspect) role model for the members of Young Pioneers organization: he denounced his own father to the authorities after learning that his father, a local minor Party official, forged documents and sold them to the *kulaks*, who fought compulsory relocation during collectivization.

great Soviet citizens, and are noticed by the “Great Lenin-Stalin” himself, who asks the three Akhmats to join him in his “Invisible Kremlin” in “Heavenly Moscow”, where they live in complete unity with the mythical (and magically zoomorphic) entity of “Lenin-Stalin”, in fact *on* Lenin-Stalin’s sacred body parts that each rule a particular aspect of the universe: chest, horns, and genitalia.

While this amusing story does little to reconstruct the textuality of Russian classics through its deconstruction (as the rest of the clones’ texts do), it does illuminate the mechanism by which symbolic entities of Russian writers become loci of symbolic authority. Grammatically, Russian last names are possessive adjectives referring to the father’s name (“Akhmatova” means, literally, “Akhmat’s”); simultaneously, the Russian last name is homonymous to two case forms of the father’s name. The three sons of the collective farm workers by the name Akhmat become, through their names being used in a variety of case forms, a ritualistic repetition of Anna Akhmatova’s last name. This sacrally multiplied Anna Akhmatova goes on to join the all-encompassing, omnipotent “Lenin-Stalin”, the master signifier of the Soviet symbolic order, a benevolent father who validates all kinds of symbolic authorities (the Akhmats’ sublime citizenly qualities and Anna Akhmatova’s writerly authority) by subsuming them.

Such metaphorization of Stalin in Sorokin is, of course, another ironically grotesque exaggeration. Yet, in view of the way that exaggeration functioned for Sorokin so far, we may argue that Stalin as Groys’s “artist-tyrant” re-emerges from Sorokin’s deconstruction. It is through this paternal validation that the (Soviet) writer can enter the space of intertwined literary production and reception, to cross the boundary between art and life and to become a character. Sorokin not just magnifies this aspect of Socialist

Realist aesthetics by metaphorizing, in Akhmatova-2's poem, the way in which Russian writers can become characters; Sorokin compulsively recreates it for post-Soviet textuality by allowing the Russian writers to exist as literary characters in *Blue Lard* itself.

Repetitively examining "Lenin-Stalin's" "mighty horns" and "hairy balls" in Ahkmatova-2's poem, along with making Stalin the object of Khrushchev's lust in the novel may look like a transgression of symbolic authority, and it is. So is making Joseph Brodsky swallow the disgusting black egg, and the rest of Sorokin's grotesque portrayals of the Russian classics. Yet, we can argue (in the Bakhtinian vein) that controlled transgression of the law *affirms and sustains* the law. Sorokin's own text becomes an occasion to dissect the laws governing the myth of Russian literature, and while these laws do not work for the duration of the text, their existence is illuminated by their very absence. To follow in the same vein, Sorokin's text then becomes a site of carnival, a site of legitimized (and tightly controlled) transgression of the symbolic authority of the mythologized Russian literary tradition.

Blue Lard demonstrates that the continuum of literary production and reception staged by Socialist Realist aesthetic paradigm remains a lucrative space for post-Soviet literature as it mourns the magical porosity of the boundary between art and life. This porosity used to ensure the functionality of the myth of Russian literature by allowing the reader, the writer, and the character to seamlessly transition between these "states of matter" in the field of literary production and reception. This is a seemingly dead magical space: it is validated by the already-dead symbolic Father, its magic destroyed and its language dysfunctional; it is populated by the monstrous caricatures of Russian writers-

cum-characters. And yet, the real existence of a *mardong* of culture begins after its death, Viktor Pelevin reminds us: in the controlled textual environment of Sorokin's monster laboratory, the congealed symbolic entities of the Russian classics melt under the "lexical impact" of Sorokin's linguistic experimentation, both Russian classical textuality and its symbolic authority thus re-actualized in the post-Soviet cultural field.

Conclusion: The Writer, the Reader, the Character: The Post-Soviet Politics of Textual Appropriation.

In 2009, Lev Tolstoy makes a grand re-entrance into the post-Soviet literary landscape as the protagonist of Viktor Pelevin's most recent novel, *T*. What at the onset looks like historical crime fiction, a genre popularized in the early 2000s by Boris Akunin's bestselling imperial nostalgia series,¹⁰⁹ introduces an image of Tolstoy familiar to every school-educated Russian: the Count-turned-peasant ploughs the fields in search of spiritual revelation. The novel then makes a series of sharp plot turns, revealing Count T. to be, first, an accomplished martial artist suffering from amnesia, and, later on, a self-aware character in the not-yet-completed post-Soviet historical crime fiction bestseller. The creator of Count T., Ariel, his Shakespearian origins mockingly apparent, is a cynical writer for whom writing is a commercial project, controlled by mysterious (and very powerful) investors. Ariel reveals himself to his protagonist, and Count T. has to follow, dumbfounded, the twists and turns of the complex politics of post-Soviet publishing as the investors reject one plot line and demand another.

¹⁰⁹ Boris Akunin's continuing *Fandorin* series, an experiment in genre fiction by eminent Georgian-Russian literary critic Grigorii Chkhartishvili, includes fourteen books (1998-present). Akunin's highly engaging prose is stylized to resemble *fin-de-siecle* Russian language, and features an intelligent, attractive protagonist detective, an exoticized sidekick, romantic love stories, and political and social commentary that posits the last years of the Russian Empire as a beautiful, diverse, exciting space of cultural stability. Four of Akunin's novels were adapted for screen in 2000s, with A-list cast, affirming the continuing popularity of the genre.

Instead of following the original plan to send Count T. on a quest to find the place of great spiritual significance, Optina Hermitage (little to no relation to the actual Orthodox monastery which historical Lev Tolstoy visited), Ariel puts the Count into excessively random tight spots, which allows the Count to showcase his impressive martial arts skills as he contemplates his identity as a self-aware character. Crossing the media boundaries on the whim of the publishing executives, Count T. meets another action hero, Fyodor Dostoevsky, a protagonist of a video game and a skilled sharpshooter.¹¹⁰

The bewildered Count tries to reacquire some agency in the story where he is the powerless protagonist, and begins to write, real landscapes emerging before his eyes from the words he puts on paper. Several complicated, Dan Brown-like conspiracy theories, many philosophical discussions about the nature of reality, and a multitude of clever puns later, Lev Tolstoy dreams about the novel Pelevin's reader is currently reading and concludes that the writer has to pretend that he is a character in order for the character to appear. Immediately, we are back to Count T., who in the course of his quest has acquired greater understanding (and mysterious powers). These powers enable him to eventually collapse his creator's world, annihilating Ariel and leaving Count T. in the textual space of Pelevin's text, complete with references to earlier Pelevin novels. The appeased protagonist rides into the sunset, while the narration switches, for the first time, from third person subjective to objective, claiming that all words are but a dream.

¹¹⁰ This video game character has to navigate a post-apocalyptic, sun-less landscape of, ostensibly, St. Petersburg. Ariel explains to the puzzled Count that the first-person shooter game will be marketed as "Dostoevsky's Petersburg" (re-branding the already-mentioned gloominess associated with the notion as a post-apocalyptic landscape), and that the branding decision is based on rock-solid market research, attesting to the persistence of this imaginary literary space in the post-Soviet public consciousness.

By 2009, Pelevin has cemented his status as the “most influential Russian intellectual”¹¹¹ and has become a cult Russian writer with websites, discussion forums and a series of mockingly “deep” web comics¹¹² devoted to his carefully cultivated, enigmatic public persona. The publisher’s description of *T* ironically comments on the cult of Pelevin through a reversal of authority: “*T* is the new novel by [Viktor Pelevin]. [During his reign], Brezhnev, Gorbachev and Putin served the people.”¹¹³ The blurb omits Boris Yeltsin from the sequence of Russian leaders, thus positing the 1990s as a gap in Russian statehood, a gap whose edges are held together by the figure of Pelevin. The 2009 return to the figure of the writer sustaining a mythological continuity of national history is significant: in the 1990s, we have seen thoughts about the place that national literature occupies in the public consciousness scattered across the collections of short stories (in Pelevin) and tucked between the deconstruction of Soviet master discourses (in Sorokin). However, no single novel dealt with the post-Soviet challenges to the mythologies of Russian literature as extensively and as directly as Pelevin’s *T*.

The Russian writers-turned-characters in *T* are, at the first glance, stick-figures produced by the “literature-centric school education,” reduced to formulas like “Tolstoy ploughed the land,” operating in similarly formulaic space like “gloomy, deserted St. Petersburg” as it “always” appears in Dostoevsky. These formulas are piled on top of other formulaic tidbits of globalized popular culture imagery, like martial artist-cum-superhero shooting zombies. Making Lev Tolstoy do back flips is a strategy more fit for a

¹¹¹ See “Samyi Vliiatel’nyi Intellectual Rossii. Opros v detaliakh” (ArtMedia Group, December 12, 2009), OpenSpace.Ru (<http://www.openspace.ru/society/russia/details/15155/>)

¹¹² For some amusing examples, see Pelevin’s fan site: Pelevin.nov.ru, “Viktor Olegovich” (<http://www.pelevin.nov.ru/victorolegovich/>)

¹¹³ The publisher’s description of *T*: “*T* – новый роман писателя, в эпоху которого служили народу Брежнев, Горбачев, Путин”.

media fandom in a post-industrial society than for the otherwise surprisingly traditional Russian novel of ideas, which makes me propose that the intertextual strategy staged by Sorokin and fully developed in Pelevin is what Michel De Certeau calls “textual poaching.”

De Certeau argues that the consumer of culture, marginalized by the cultural industry (as the post-Soviet writer, the reader of the classics, was marginalized by the post-Soviet economic and cultural transition) appropriates the authoritative text through reading it, to simultaneously transgress and reinforce its symbolic authority.¹¹⁴ Textual poaching ultimately produces a derivative textuality aimed to cover a perceived lack in the original text. However, it also produces a transgressive enjoyment at the intersection of textual production and reception, blurring the boundary between the reader and the writer. Such a blurred boundary sustained the myth of Socialist Realist total art, and continues to sustain contemporary Russian literature as it negotiates its place in the post-Soviet cultural field.

In Pelevin’s novel, there exists a kind of “total textuality” where the boundaries between text and life are impossible to define. And of course, this totality emerges as an outcome of the act of reading. Pelevin allows Count T. to start out as a conventional character, and then to become a developed, self-aware character who questions the nature of the creative process and possesses as much free will as a character of such an ironically self-aware novel could. Count T., then, openly acts out the process to which Sorokin’s not-less-formulaic, reductive pastiches of the Russian classics pointed: he constructs a textual fantasy of an inseparable creative unity between the writer, the

¹¹⁴ Michel De Certeau, “Reading as poaching”, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 165-176, esp. 171,174.

reader, and the character. “The Writer, You [Count T.], and the Reader – that [is] the Trinity,” Count T. learns. “It seems that there is a difference between these three notions. But in fact they point to one and the same thing, and there is nothing else beside that thing.”¹¹⁵ Of course, as Pelevin’s earlier texts demonstrated, the one who “learns” something here is the reader of *Pelevin’s* text, who has so far been a little lost as to their own place in the interplay of creative agency in the novel. Now that this metaphor for total art comes into picture, let us dwell on this suddenly magnified the role of the reader in *T*.

Before *T*, Pelevin has already sketched his extensively complex vision of the interaction of creative agencies in literary production and reception.¹¹⁶ In *T*, the woes of post-Soviet readership discussed in the beginning of this chapter finally come to be articulated. On the plane of the novel that is a satire of post-Soviet society (the genre which brought Pelevin most of his success), Pelevin outlines the somewhat frightening monetary power that the consumer of culture wields in the post-Soviet context, and the reader’s ability to influence (albeit indirectly) the decisions of production.

On another level, Pelevin’s inquiry into the nature of the creative process and into the amount of a reader’s participation in it yields a theory of creativity which appeals to the principles of Soviet art as much as it grounds itself in the mysticism associated with the magic of the written word, with the same *logos* that was rotting in the mouth of the Russian intellectual roughly fifteen years before.

¹¹⁵ Viktor Pelevin. *T* (Moskva: Eksmo-Press, 2009), 365. “Автор, Ты и Читатель – таким было его [Соловьева] понимание Троицы. Кажется, что между этими тремя понятиями есть разница. Но в действительности они указывают на одно и то же, и кроме него нет ничего вообще”.

¹¹⁶ In an earlier short novel, *Numbers* (*Chisla*, 2003), Pelevin’s jaded protagonist kills time by flipping through pages of a wildly imaginative postmodernist intellectual journal, learning through the nearly Derridean pun based on rearrangement of syllables that the conventional dichotomy “writer-reader” (*pisatel’ - chitatel’*) apparently does not take into account the other two agents of the “creative rectangle”, “the scratcher and the feeder” (*chesatel’ - pitatel’*).

Count T. learns (together with Pelevin's reader) in the course of (their) spiritual quest that:

When a person practices mysticism, he should as if divide himself into two parts: the book, and its reader. The book is all the movements of our soul...all our thoughts, fears, and hopes... We are unable to let go of these black pages. But, instead of flipping through these pages day after day, one ought to find the reader.

To be joined with this reader is the utmost spiritual goal.¹¹⁷

Now that the reader takes on the function assigned by contemporary monotheistic religions to none other than God himself, the problem of post-Soviet literature's inability to enter into a dialogue with the Russian literary canon is, to an extent, resolved. What looked like a unilateral dialogue with silent classics, reduced to idols, was always a dialogue with the reader, filtered through a fetishistic appeal to the symbolic authority of the classics. The *mardongs* of the classics populating the post-Soviet literary landscape are there to join forces with the post-Soviet writers in order to sustain the fantasy of the ideal reader who, as we have seen, makes the very existence of literature possible.

¹¹⁷ Viktor Pelevin. T (Moskva: Eksmo-Press, 2009), 210. "Его учение заключалось в том, что человек, занимаясь мистическим деланием, должен как бы делить себя на книгу и ее читателя. Книга – это все содрогания нашего духа, все порывы и метания, все наши мысли, страхи, надежды... мы не можем оторваться от этих черных страниц. Но, вместо того, чтобы перелистывать их день за днем, следует найти читателя. Слиться с ним и есть высшая духовная цель".

CHAPTER 2¹

National Past, *Lubok*-Style: Post-Soviet Cinematic Construction of the Historical Past

Glasnost, *Chernukha* and the Emergence of the Past

In one of the earliest post-Soviet monographs on the theory of cinema, Semen Freilikh notes an acute structural similarity in cinematic representations of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and of late-perestroika and early post-Soviet experience. In Freilikh's view, these historical moments are represented in cinema as points of rupture, when "the historical ties are broken."² In the 1990s, this breaking of historical ties looked definitive, not in the least because it was, primarily, metaphorical.³ When scholars metaphorized the disappearance of the Soviet Union as "fall" and "collapse," the very discourse that described the socio-cultural shift underway in post-Soviet culture became the first conceptual step on the way to distancing Russia's present from its past.

Yet, late-Soviet cinema was already preoccupied with the past, uncertain about language and reliant on the absurdist aesthetics as far back as the early 1980s. The Soviet films of the period already searched for a new aesthetic that pushes outside of the boundaries of the conventional, teleological Soviet narratives. In the words of Lily Avrutin:

an artistic model capable of arriving at new meanings ... represents not a forward movement along a straight road—as in traditional narrative—but a wandering, roaming

¹ Parts of this chapter appeared in: Daria Kabanova, "National Past, *Lubok*-Style: Post-Soviet Cinematic Construction of the Historical Past". In *honour of Peeter Torop 60. A Collection of Paper from Young Scholars*. Olvasatok/Readings 2. "Russian Literature and Literary Studies". University of Tartu: Department of Semiotics. Tartu and Budapest, Eötvös Loránd University, 2010. 36-65.

² This is probably one of the first uses of the term "rupture" in relation to the tropes of late Soviet cinema by Russian scholar Semyon Freilikh, *Teoriia kino: ot Eizenshteina do Tarkovskogo* (Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1992), 270.

³ I am drawing here on the argument put forward by Kevin Platt in Kevin M.F. Platt, "The Post-Soviet is Over: On Reading the Ruins", in *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1, no. 1 (May 1, 2009): <http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/41>.

exploration in a space of collage, where the labyrinth of closed time-space is the most suitable chronotope for searching out new post-totalitarian meanings.⁴

The search for new meanings in late-Soviet cinema was facilitated by *glasnost*’, the policy of “openness” and transparency that Mikhail Gorbachev promoted along with economic restructuring, the *perestroika*, in the late 1980s. *Glasnost*’ is almost universally acknowledged to be a failed policy,⁵ on the one hand not radical enough, yet on the other *too* radical and therefore responsible for the collapse of the system that it was meant to reform.

Something interesting happened in the way late-Soviet culture absorbed *glasnost*’. Officially a policy to reduce corruption and increase social accountability in government institutions,⁶ *glasnost*’ almost immediately acquired an additional cultural meaning: it became quickly associated with freedom of speech and freedom of information. In turn, this ensured that *glasnost*’ opened a space for freedom of artistic representation. In the late eighties, the horrific, the absurd, and the bleak aspects of Soviet reality become the representational focus of film and literature, reversing the prescriptive representational cheerfulness previously required by official policy.

Fig. 1, Glasnost! by Andrei Komoltsev, is one of the most well-known posters proclaiming the advent of the new state policy. An emotional face, brow furrowed and mouth slightly open as if in the beginning of an utterance, in tinted black-and-white evoking an old newsreel, dominates the white poster. Under the face, which expresses concern and determination, the word *glasnost*’ is in red, followed by an exclamation mark. On the left and

⁴ Lily Avrutin, “The Soldier, the Girl, and the Dragon: Battles of Meanings in Post-Soviet Cinematic Space.” *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2 (Winter 1999), 72-97, 75.

⁵ See Edward Hewett, Viktor Winston, *Milestones in Glasnost’ and Perestroika: Politics and People* (Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 1991), esp. 6-7.

⁶ For a comprehensive account of the social and political processes that brought about *glasnost*’, see Chapter 1 in Hewett, Winston 1991.

right, the face is framed by what looks like the remnants of a shabby bluish-gray brick wall, inlaid with crumbling words like “slander” (*kleveta*), “forgery” (*podlog*), “bribe” (*vziatka*), “bureaucracy” (*burokratiia*) and “lie” (*lozh*’).



Fig. 1. Glasnost'! (V. Komoltsev, 1988)
<<http://plakat-ussr.blogspot.com/2007/01/1.html>>

We are invited to read the poster as if these words are crumbling under the power of the emotion in the face that breaks the shabby wall with the newly-acquired force of free speech. However, only two of the five words the poster uses to describe the pre-*glasnost*' state of public affairs belong to the sociopolitical discourse per se (“bureaucracy” and “bribe”), while the rest refer to broader moral evils. It was effortlessly, then, that the initially strictly governmental policy acquired the new set of meanings, as it expands in the poster from bettering the government system and towards the need to improve core social and cultural values.

Further, the poster represents the current state of affairs for the Soviet Union as something dark, shabby, and crumbling. This kind of cultural trope is indicative of a whole

genre, spreading across several media,⁷ but most often used to refer to a peculiar cinematic aesthetic, the *chernukha* (literally, the darkness, the bleakness), which comes to define Russian art cinema of the late eighties and early nineties. *Chernukha*⁸ concerned itself with, primarily, representing that which formerly could not be represented due to strict control over cinematic production. Films like Kira Muratova's *Asthenic Syndrome* (*Astenicheskii Sindrom*, 1989), Pavel Lungin's *Taxi Blues* (1990), and Vassilii Pichul's *Little Vera* (*Malen'kaia Vera*, 1988) are the most often-cited examples of the genre, all dealing with existential hopelessness and the absurdity of late-Soviet existence as the filmmakers explore it against the background of bleak everyday reality.

Chernukha was far from being a non-problematic aesthetic.⁹ For the party functionaries, these films were obviously anti-Soviet; for the film critics, they were too pretentiously artistic.¹⁰ The Russian national cinema felt the impact of the *chernukha* films in the 1990s: George Faraday explores the “decline” of Soviet cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s, tracing the post-Soviet transition from a state-controlled institution to a producer cinema.¹¹ While acknowledging the negative impact of state ideological control on the spectatorship during the Soviet time, Faraday also notes the effect that the filmmakers’ “liberated... creative aspirations”¹² began to have on spectatorship once state control was eliminated. Neither state-controlled cinema nor the now-possible art cinema, Faraday argues, could meet the spectators’ demand for entertainment, as “the abolition of directly political forms of censorship [during

⁷ First used in reference to Ludmila Petrushevskaia's prose. See Andrei Zorin, “Kruche, Kruche, Kruche... Istoriia Pobedy: Chernukha v kul'ture poslednikh let”, “Znamya”, #10, 1992, 198-204.

⁸ For a survey of *chernukha*, see Seth Graham, “Chernukha and Russian Film”, “Studies in Slavic Cultures”, vol. 1, 2000, 9-27.

⁹ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰ Ibid, 11-12.

¹¹ George Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers: The Struggle for Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry*. (University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State UP, 2000).

¹² Ibid., 17

glasnost'] contributed to the marked deterioration of both 'artistic' and 'professional' standards."¹³

Chernukha, the aesthetic which comes to symbolize the era of *glasnost*', complete with crumbling buildings, puddles and hungry stray dogs dominating the visual field, was a compensation mechanism¹⁴ for the prescribed celebratory aesthetic of Soviet cinema.¹⁵ *Chernukha* was, at least in intention, a naturalist¹⁶ representational paradigm, based on conventionally mimetic principles of representing social reality, and it indeed was able to get closer to social reality than any Socialist Realist text could. Paradoxically, it could do so only by using the same politics of hyperbolization as Socialist Realism: *chernukha* exaggerated the bleak, the macabre and the absurd elements of late-Soviet and early post-Soviet culture, just as the Socialist Realist texts hyperbolized the festive, the celebratory, and the optimistic aspects of Soviet life. In *chernukha* films, the slow progression of cinematic narrative, the claustrophobic mise-en-scene, and the camera's lingering on elements of space that are preferably barren or crumbling¹⁷ create an effect of static, unmoving time; in the words of Eliot Borenstein, in *chernukha* everyone "lived unhappily ever after."¹⁸

¹³ Ibid., 131. The term *chernukha* is connoted negatively in Russian: this negativity, together with the films' preferred tragic subject matters, prompted the viewers to turn to Hollywood entertainment cinema. Faraday describes the early 1990s as a time when "the theater audience for Russian films shrunk hundredfold" (Faraday 2). By the later 1990s, then, the national cinema's role as an instrument of state ideology was diminished precisely at the moment when the search for the new national idea was officially sanctioned and cinematically launched.

¹⁴ As suggested by T. Khlopliankina, "Vsio Razresheno?", *Iskusstvo Kino*, #7, 1989, 49-51. A similar idea is voiced by Helena Goscilo, "Body Talk in Current Fiction: Speaking Parts and (W)holes," quoted in Graham 12.

¹⁵ *The Carnival Night*, a 1956 film by El'dar Riazanov, is a prime example of this aesthetic, as evident already from the film's title.

¹⁶ For a discussion of *chernukha* as artistic naturalism, see Mark Lipovetsky, "Rastratnyie Strategii, ili Metamorfozy Chernukhi", in *Novyi Mir*, 1999, #11, online version at <http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/lipovez.html>, accessed Sept 19, 2009.

¹⁷ See, e.g., a review of *Taxi Blues*: Herbert Eagle, "A Review of *Taxi Blues*", "Slavic Review", Vol. 52, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), 353-354, esp. 354.

¹⁸ Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 7.

Chernukha dominated Russian cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s so effectively that in the 1992 film, *Prorva* (*Moscow Parade*, dir. Ivan Dykhovichnyi), reviewers are struck by a sudden reversal of the *chernukha* aesthetics. According to Alla Efimova,

In the film [*Moscow Parade*]... the charms of Soviet power are recreated with straightforward clarity. The intensely beautiful visual clichés not only form a background for the film’s narrative but almost seem to be the object of the film, its main characters. The sparkling gilded stations of the Moscow metro, the sun-drenched Fountain of Friendship at the Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition, the tanned athletes clad in white and waiving red banners – these are now the cliché images of Stalinist Russia that are replacing images of the Gulag or communal apartments.¹⁹

Why, on the cusp of 1990s, amidst the tragic dreamscapes of Russia’s present constructed by the *chernukha* films, does there emerge the intense beauty of Stalin’s Moscow? In this chapter, I will trace visual and narrative strategies which the Russian films of the 1990s employ to construct Russia’s national past out of the historical rupture that the end of the Soviet state produced, mythologizing the past of the country that seemed stuck in its present.

***Perestroika* and Beyond: Establishing the Past.**

Karen Shakhnazarov’s *City Zero*: Musealization.

Late-Soviet cinema’s mode of “roaming exploration” (as Avrutin calls it) characterizes Karen Shakhnazarov’s *City Zero* (*Gorod Zero*, alternative title *Zeroград*) that appeared in 1988, amid the gradual disillusionment with *glasnost*. *Glasnost*’s relative freedom of speech and information almost immediately opened a cultural field too vast to be readily navigated. Soviet

¹⁹ Alla Efimova, “Touch on the Raw: The Aesthetic Affections of Socialist Realism” in *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1, Aesthetics and the Body Politic (Spring, 1997), 72-80, 72.

values now had to be negotiated within the stream of Western cultural products and commodities pouring into USSR. The early reviews²⁰ of *City Zero* appear on the pages of the *Sovetskii Ekran* (*The Soviet Screen*) journal among articles that confusedly attempt to make sense of the new names, titles and trends to which they now have access.

City Zero received mixed reviews: the reviewers either blamed Shakhnazarov for creating a film with an unclear ideological message, or criticized the film's absurdist aesthetics. Every reviewer, nonetheless, acknowledged Shakhnazarov's directorial skill.²¹ Indeed, *City Zero* is ideologically suspect:

In Karen Shakhnazarov's *Zero City*, a flip-flop paraphrase of [Gogol's] *The Inspector General*, a Soviet yuppie inspector comes to a remote Russian town only to find himself a part of a ludicrous puzzle without a clue, a labyrinth with no way out. The secretary of the plant office that he has been sent to inspect appears in full nude before him. In a restaurant, he is served a cake in the shape of his own head for dessert. A psychic boy tells him that he will never escape...²²

In fact, the protagonist, Varakin, manages to escape the city after a series of bizarre and meaningless encounters; however, his fate is still unclear: "In the end, the hero is left in a small rowboat in the middle of the lake, shrouded in a thick fog."²³ The rowboat has no oars, allegorically denying the protagonist any mastery of his own fate.

City Zero is a direct, though complex, reaction to the public disillusionment with the policy of *glasnost*: "In... *Zerograd* ... the alleged bright hope of *glasnost*' is seen as an open

²⁰ See "Igra Pustogo i Porozhnego", "Sovetskii Ekran", #9 (1990), 5.

²¹ See P. Cherniaev, "Gorod Zero", in "Sovetskii Ekran", #22 (1988), 12-13; also, A. Shemiakin, "Po tu storonu zdravogo smysla", "Sovetskii Ekran", #16 (1989), 14-15.

²² See Michael Brashinsky (1993), "Closely watched drains: Notes by a dilettante on the Soviet absurdist film", in *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter With a Lash*, ed. Andrew Horton (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 58-65, 61.

²³ Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 223.

Pandora's box of death, destruction, betrayal, failure and hostility."²⁴ However, the "bright hope of *glasnost*" was precisely the reason why a film like *City Zero* was made in the first place; just a few years earlier, the state's strict financial and ideological control of film production would have made this kind of artistic experimentation impossible. Shakhnazarov himself later lamented the end of censorship system that, in his view, eliminated the only institutional selection mechanism within Soviet film production (in the absence of market economy).²⁵ In 1988, however, the dangers of "artistic autonomy" to the institution of national cinema and to spectatorship were not yet felt clearly. Shakhnazarov readily used the opportunities of *glasnost*'s new semantic regime to criticize the unexpected consequences of this very regime, his absurdist critique of the late-Soviet disintegrating public space de(con)structing this space further.

Michael Brashinsky's theory of Socialist absurdism is largely based on his reading of *City Zero* as he claims that "Socialist absurdism, unlike existentialist absurdism... creates models of the oppressed society, not of the universe."²⁶ Indeed, in the context of Soviet cinema's narrative model that propels the protagonist towards the (preferably ideologically sound) goal, the protagonist's impassive rambles through a chain of meaningless, disconnected encounters comment upon (and negate) Soviet cinema's compulsory ideological charge. The plot of the film is "not the point in this inventive dark allegory without a punchline. It is enough to know that Varakin is both the hero and victim of various narrative strands."²⁷ As they serve Varakin a cake in the form of his own head as a dessert that he did not order, as they accuse him of being accomplice to the suicide of a restaurant chef who everyone believes to be Varakin's father, there is no sense of progression, Anna Lawton suggests, continuing that

²⁴ See Horton and Brashinsky 1992, 210.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Brashinsky 1993, 61.

²⁷ Horton, Brashinsky 1992, 210.

In *Zero City* ... dystopia is conveyed in the form of a personal nightmare... The emphasis [is] on the search for a breakthrough into the future, which does not seem to exist.

Without being solemn, the film raises the ontological question: do we still exist? [...]

Zero City is a city without coordinates, a zero on the world map, existing only as a visual expression of Varakin's inchoate fear. On the other hand, Varakin's predicament is absolutely real and, what is worse, shared by millions of Soviet citizens. The whole country, the film suggests, may very well end up in a big, round zero.²⁸

Varakin's wanderings are the only thing that holds the cinematic narrative together, but the protagonist is often effectively removed from it.²⁹ The camera tends to leave him to concentrate on static objects or slowed-down movements. In the opening sequence, when Varakin arrives to the city, the camera eagerly leaves him to look at the train that is slowly leaving the station; yet, the camera does not even bother following the train, clinging to its position on top of the bridge over the tracks, "forgetting" to suture the viewer with the character. Later, the camera seems to be more interested in the dark corner of a hotel room than in the protagonist washing his hands. Further, the setting is often presented from unexpected angles and the shots are extensively long, allowing the characters to move in and out of the frame of the disinterested camera.

These techniques create the "frozen time"³⁰ of the film, with no sense of narrative progression. The film's peculiar temporality, magnified by the absurdity of the protagonist's encounters, invites a reading of the film as a social commentary: Soviet reality has no future; its inhabitants are bewildered and lost. This is not just a social commentary, however; it is also a commentary on the Soviet aesthetics. *City Zero*'s protagonist is as much locked in the frozen

²⁸ Lawton 1992, 221-222.

²⁹ Horton, Brashinsky 1992, 211.

³⁰ The term is used in Lawton's essay.

time of the late Socialism as the new Soviet men were locked forever in the epic Great Time of Socialist Realism, in the never-ending carnival night of high Socialist culture that portrays life as it should be, “already there”, already utopian.³¹ *City Zero* dystopianizes this narrative temporality by laying bare the character’s aimless wanders, no longer sustained by ideological illusion.

While the never-ending present of Soviet narratives, then, loses all of its utopian celebratory charm and acquires instead the quality of existential tragedy in *City Zero*, one of the most commented-upon scenes in the film deals not with the Soviet Union’s present, but with history. In this scene the protagonist is lost during another fruitless attempt to escape the city; he finds himself in a museum in the middle of the woods. A talkative custodian offers to show Varakin the museum collection and leads him through a bizarre museum of living waxworks: the waxworks’ bodies are immobile but their eyes watchfully follow Varakin’s movements. The waxworks portray events of Soviet history up through the late 1970; a dashing waxwork version of a younger Stalin, too, dutifully watches Varakin. In the museum sequence, the protagonist, a common Soviet citizen, becomes an object of history’s gaze – yet, this history is perverse.

The Russian/Soviet history becomes in the scene “a carnival gone wrong, a mishmash of images, statues, heroes real or fabricated... with seemingly no connection between them.”³² The most peculiar characteristic of the exhibition is its seeming randomness and artificiality, or, as another critic puts it,

[Varakin’s] tour of the exhibition... is a journey through Russian-Soviet history; actually, a grotesque parody of it. Events and figures are placed in phony contexts, chronology is

³¹ For a discussion of this temporality, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (U of Chicago Press, 1981), 40-41.

³² *Ibid.*, 149.

distorted by odd juxtapositions, and cheap embellishments-cum-hyperbolic-ornaments degrade history to the level of a fairground attraction.³³

Indeed, when the custodian cheerfully recites the impossibly absurd “historical events,” his speech is a set of ideologically charged clichés, which Shakhnazarov’s late-Soviet viewer would immediately recognize as the party-sanctioned discourse of Soviet history. However, when the custodian mentions the “heroes of the Trojan War” who supposedly played a vital part in the local history, it becomes apparent that the authority of the Soviet discourse is seriously compromised. The “real” events of national history become as much of a fiction as the presence of Trojans in (presumably) European Russia, precisely because the discourse used to talk about both is virtually the same.

The museum sequence of *City Zero* nearly begs to be (and was³⁴) read as a postmodernist pastiche of national history. Anna Lawton claims that “[o]bviously, in *Zero City* history is dead, and so is the collective memory of the past. In the end, the hero is left in a small rowboat in the middle of the lake, shrouded in a thick fog. Because where there is no past there cannot be any future.”³⁵

However, in the final sequence of the film, long after Varakin is gone, the museum custodian takes a long time going around the museum, switching off the lights. The shapes of the waxworks are visible in the dark, waiting for their next visitor. What is dead is not precisely history but a conventional assumption of its authentic quality; by deconstructing Soviet history and putting its bits and pieces safely underground, the film leaves a conceptual space for history’s overall possibility of existence amid the never-ending late-Soviet present. Of all

³³ Lawton 1992, 222.

³⁴ For a close reading of the museum scene as an associative pastiche, see Gerald McCausland, “The Post-Soviet Condition: Cultural Reconfigurations of Russian Identity” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2006), 156-157.

³⁵ Lawton 1992, 223.

Varakin's journeys, his grotesque tour of the museum is, paradoxically, the most coherent one; the film builds up a site to store the symbols and images associated with the Soviet state, truth and lies alike - the museum.

Musealization of history, the creation of distinct places where the artifacts of the past can be (seemingly) safely preserved, is a compensatory mechanism that, in the words of Andreas Huyssen, "acknowledges a loss of national or communal identity but trusts in our ability to make up for it."³⁶ Musealizing history, Huyssen warns, contains an amnesiac possibility, as the artifacts of the past lose their "authentic" contextual ties and thus their authentic meanings through being preserved.³⁷

Yet, while *City Zero* lays bare the risks of musealized national history, it also makes use of these risks. The very decontextualization of images in the museum sequence provides if not an authentic Soviet history, then at least an unexpectedly genuine one. In the film, the museum is the only "alternative" to the bleak, desolate landscape of *City Zero*. While early reviews of the film read the sequence as signifying that Soviet history is dead (just as Huyssen warns that no "true" history can arise from musealization), the film does not search for a true history; rather, it attempts to assess and preserve the symbology associated with the past, magnifying the exaggerations and outright lies of Soviet history in the museum setting.

City Zero acknowledges the impossibility of history's authenticity and yet proceeds with recreating it amidst the cultural obsession with the never-ending late-Soviet present. The past, in the film, is sufficiently removed from the bleakness of the present, and, however bizarre and absurd, is safe: it can be visited, and it is organized rationally (far from being Horton's "complete

³⁶ See Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia", in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *Globalization* (Duke University Press, 2001), 57-78, 71.

³⁷ The article version of the above: Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia", in *Public Culture* 12.1 (2000), 21-38, 24

mishmash of images”, the exhibition is arranged in a conventional historiographic way from past to present). The film creates a fetishistic modality of representing national history that will be picked up by later Russian cinema. The fetishist’s “I know very well [that *this* is not the real object of desire] but all the same” attests to the dilemma that a musealizing culture faces in Huyssen’s argument. A musealizing culture has to reconcile the desire to ward off cultural amnesia with the understanding that there will emerge no “authentic” past. Russian films of the later 1990s and early 2000s will treat national history in a way strikingly similar to that of *City Zero*: history will again be confined to a cinematic space where objectively verifiable facts are interspersed with complex symbolic fantasies and historical falsifications, all equal in potential mythopoetic (and thus ideological) value.

The museum sequence of *City Zero* stages the divide between the late-Soviet eternal present and the Soviet past, simultaneously warding off the amnesia that the unmoving late-Soviet national time produces, however “imperfect” the mode of doing so may be. The museum of *City Zero* is already a nostalgic creation, preserving not the national past *per se* but the representational modality used to speak of history in the Soviet Union, a modality that was seemingly quickly disappearing together with the celebratory aesthetics of Socialist Realism. The museum is, in the film, a defense against cultural amnesia: its existence ensures that there *is* a place for the past, a place that can be visited and which safely holds all the symbols associated with the past, truth together with lies, horrors together with celebratory posters.

Furthermore, while the sequence denies history its authenticity, it also provides for an unexpected source of enjoyment, however perverse. Horton examines the film through Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque, arguing that the film leaves open the possibility “in the

future of a carnival that again finds its roots and its liberating laughter, both joyful and satiric.”³⁸

The source of the carnivalesque in the film is its absurdist take on the reality: the weak connections between the occurrences in the film, the disorganized space and the purposeless movements break both narrative and cinematic conventions, thus allowing for the Bakhtinian "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers... of the prohibitions of usual life."³⁹

The Bakhtinian carnival is a cultural space where decontextualization can be a source of enjoyment and simultaneously serve as a form of memorialization. *City Zero* imagines precisely this kind of space: the protagonist's existential tragedy is, through its sheer absurdity, transformed into a cinematic carnival. Boris Groys notes in his "Between Stalin and Dionysus" (1989) that the thin line between tragedy and comedy is only too penetrable in the carnival:

...no one is given the democratic right to shirk carnival, to not take part, to remain on the sidelines. On the contrary, precisely those who try to do so are the first to be subject to well-deserved "cheerful vilifications and beatings." According to Bakhtin, this nightmare is transformed into carnival thanks to the laughter that accompanies it.⁴⁰

Horton's assessment of the film as "a carnival gone wrong,"⁴¹ then, can be, paradoxically, read as a carnival going exactly right. *City Zero* looks for the means to transform the horrifyingly bleak and hopeless everyday reality into a spectacle of defamiliarization. In order to do so, it turns to totalitarian aesthetics.

The most striking shot of the museum sequence shows a museum installation in the shape of a red rotating platform vaguely resembling a multi-tiered layer cake, crowned by a red star.

³⁸ Horton 1993: 148-149.

³⁹ See Bakhtin 1984, 15.

⁴⁰ Boris Groys, "Mezhdu Stalinyem i Dionisom", in "Sintaksis" # 25 (Paris, 1989), 92-97, 95, quoted in Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, (Princeton University Press, 2000), 171.

⁴¹ Horton 1993:149.

The “cake” is laden with wax figures that represent peasants in traditional dress, workers holding their instruments, but also with the newer additions to the late-Soviet landscape like a *stilyaga*, in a tailored skinny suit and sunglasses, complete with Elvis-like brilliantined hairstyle - a figure that was a subject of many accusations of anti-Sovietism in the 1960s and 1970s. The installation evokes the way Stalinist culture conveyed the message of unity by putting together images of various “typical” figures, preferably in circular order, in the mesmerizing excess of the mass ornament, to borrow from Siegfried Kracauer.⁴²

Perhaps the most famous example of this kind of art is the Friendship of Nations Fountain at the Moscow Exhibition Fair (built in 1954). The fountain features sixteen golden figures encircling a sheaf of wheat, representing sixteen⁴³ Soviet republics. The architecture of the fountain elucidates two aspects of totalitarian ideology, order and inclusiveness (of course, “within bounds”), which are parodied in the museum installation of *City Zero* by being taken to the extreme: everyone, even the “anti-Soviet elements” like *stilyagi*, is included into the mock-celebration of Soviet culture, arranged in a distinct pattern but in no meaningful order.

This satiric take on the Soviet dominant aesthetic is what prompted the earlier readings of the film to argue that Soviet history is highly disorganized in the film’s interpretation. However, the museum installation, satirical as it is, does not quite let the totalitarian aesthetic go: the “layer cake” becomes a locus of the late-Soviet absurdist aesthetics of *glasnost*’ just as the Friendship of Nations Fountain is a locus of high Soviet ideology. The principles of Soviet art, seemingly completely rejected in late-Soviet era, are thus already put to use; the museum installation takes a totalitarian pattern (which is in the late-Soviet era already dysfunctional in its ability to project

⁴² See Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament”, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Harvard University Press, 2005), 75-89, esp. 83, where Kracauer argues that the mass ornament “reveals itself as a mythological cult”, also 84.

⁴³ The sixteenth republic is the Karelo-Finnish SSR, which later was integrated as an autonomous republic into Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1956.

Soviet ideological meanings but *not* in its structure and composition), and invests it with a new meaning, that of anti-totalitarian (and liberating carnivalesque) inclusiveness.

City Zero creates a vault out of Soviet history and musealizes the Soviet symbols that have lost their authentic meaning in the late-Soviet cultural milieu.⁴⁴ It is paradoxical that this becomes possible only through evoking the aesthetic of high Stalinism, yet in some way this is not entirely surprising. The key to this representational continuity is totalitarian art's celebratory defamiliarization of reality.

The Friendship of the Nations Fountain will prominently reappear in Ivan Dykhovichnyi's 1992 film *Prorva (Moscow Parade)*, which explicitly returns to the celebratory festivity of Stalinist culture. This return, while it has surprised the critics amidst the bleakness of the *chernukha*'s cinematic landscapes, is not as surprising as it may seem at the first glance: late-Soviet cinema never let the Socialist Realist aesthetic go even as it critiqued and deconstructed it. The deconstruction revealed the "sentimental value" of Stalinist culture as a place of nostalgia where life is bright and beautiful even as it is fake, as a place where the Soviet paternal metaphor is functional.

***Moscow Parade* and the Undead Stalin: Nostalgic Idealization of the Past and the Resurrection of Paternal Metaphor.**

The disappearance of censorship over cinematic production during *glasnost*' is one facet of a larger symbolic shift at work in the late-Soviet culture. In Lacanian terms, the outcome of *glasnost*' marked the definitive disintegration of the Soviet version of the Name-of-the-Father, embodied in the figure of Stalin.

⁴⁴ For more on the mechanism of this process, see the discussion of Aleksei Yurchak's theory (in his *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: the Last Soviet Generation*) in Chapter 3.

Critics often note the dependence of the Soviet narrative of the nation on the figure of Stalin.⁴⁵ Yana Hashamova notes a “particular [Russian] political tradition of upholding the leader as the father of the nation,”⁴⁶ a tradition that weakens after Stalin’s death and especially in the last quarter of the 20th century. Anna Lawton examines the role of Stalin as a master signifier of the Soviet narrative, arguing that the return to symbolic representations of Stalin as well as the heightened (if negatively colored) interest in the historical figure itself during *perestroika* signified not only the impending collapse of the narrative of state, but also was an attempt on the part of the filmmakers to hold together the Soviet narratives falling apart. Lawton suggests that the subsequent “trivialisation of the demon”⁴⁷ is among the mechanisms of the collapse itself. She reads the repetitive appearance of the “ghost of Stalin” on screen (like the one in *City Zero* – a waxwork with no real agency but nonetheless taking time to watch the protagonist) as a delayed reaction to the historical trauma of Stalinism.

This ghost dominates the 1992 film *Moscow Parade* (Russian title, *Prorva*, “Abyss”). The film narrates a story of a (former) noblewoman, Anna, who marries a top-tier NKVD (State Security) officer in the 1930s. Anna’s hate towards the Soviet ruling elite needs to be contained, because Anna does not want to let go of the luxurious lifestyle this elite enjoys. Her love for a young porter, Gosha, develops against the backdrop of omnipresent paranoia (“who is to judge the traitor of the state better than his friend,” says one of the characters) and the ruling elite’s excesses and violence. The love story has an unhappy ending, but along with torment and

⁴⁵ The collection *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, the first post-Soviet study of the figure of Stalin as Soviet Russia’s Big Other,⁴⁵ not just explores implications of Stalinism affecting all the levels of cultural production and the role of Stalin’s figure in shaping the cinematic narratives of nation in the films of 1930-40s, but also analyzes the “Stalin legacy” in the Soviet cinema of *glasnost*.

⁴⁶ Hashamova 116.

⁴⁷ Lawton 1993, 200. The metaphor refers to the title of Russian modernist writer Fyodor Sologub’s novel, *Petty Demon* (1902), which depicts the protagonist’s gradual descent into madness as he is terrorized by a little hallucination which, though seemingly insignificant, is able to torment and manipulate the protagonist.

paranoia – the definitive tropes of assessing Stalinism in late-Soviet and early post-Soviet culture – there emerges something unexpected.

The film's subplot is a preparation for a parade in Moscow's Red Square, in which Anna's husband takes part. The Red Square parades, besides showcasing the military might of the Soviet Union, were in the Stalin era also an excuse to showcase the New Soviet Man. The opening sequence of the film shows supposedly documentary footage of a pre-WWII Red Square parade. Repeatedly shown is one rotating parade float that looks like a giant wheel, with athletes as the wheel's spokes. The wheel's imperially slow movement conceals the large billboard that the float passes on its way through the Red Square. The billboard features a portrait of Stalin; he looks slightly to the side, which, together with the angle of the shot, creates the impression that Stalin looks at the camera in those brief seconds that his face is visible in between the athlete-spokes. This is not a direct gaze, and Stalin is sufficiently concealed from clear view, so that his presence at the parade is a phantom presence, hardly registered visually because of the wheel's rotation. Yet, the opening shot sets Stalin's presence throughout the film, as the camera repeatedly lingers on the Kremlin towers, looking upwards on the raising towers from roughly the same angle as in the opening sequence. Though there is no Stalin per se in these shots, the camera focuses on the symbols of Russian statehood assuming the same vaguely subservient position as it did when it looked at the image of Stalin.

The most prominent trope of the film is constant juxtaposition of the private, dark though luxurious spaces of the security officers' apartments with brand-new, grand buildings of Moscow of the late 1930s, brightly lit by the sun. The gilded sculptures of the Friendship of the Nations Fountain dominate those several scenes in the film which examine the possibility of friendship and love under Stalinism. However, the prominence of this totalitarian masterpiece in the film

perhaps inadvertently reveals the degree of historical manipulation that went into constructing the paranoid, yet strangely tempting, atmosphere of Stalin-dominated Moscow. The appearance of the fountain in the film (perhaps deliberately) destroys all pretense the film might have had for any kind of historical accuracy: the fountain was built fifteen-odd years after the events of the film take place, as (to borrow a Freudian turn of the phrase) the director, Dykhovichnyi, obviously knows very well, but his representational goals lie elsewhere. What the film creates is a panorama of an historical era not rooted in the conventional principles of (objective) historical representation. Instead, the Stalinist era acquires in the film a phantasmatic quality, constructed as a site of memory: the film brings together, in the same cinematic space, symbols, concepts and artifacts associated with totalitarianism, allowing the celebratory aesthetics to coexist with paranoia, violence, and betrayal. Stalinist Moscow becomes a space that contains all of Stalinism, irrespective of the symbol's place in "objective" history.

This mechanism seems to be very productive in creating the usable simulacrum of a national past that is the function of post-Communist nostalgia⁴⁸. The nostalgic current of the film emerges from its evidently uneasy position towards Stalinism. Stalinism was repeatedly condemned in Soviet (and post-Soviet) public discourse from the XX Communist Party Congress of 1956⁴⁹ up to the 2000s when in the context of the move towards authoritarianism⁵⁰ there

⁴⁸ As discussed by Svetlana Boym: see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁴⁹ The XX Party Congress (February 14-25, 1956) is known for the first open discussion of the "cult of personality," in the context of Nikita Khrushchev's Report to the Congress, first published only in 1989 (in *Izvestiia CK KPSS*, 1989, #3). The Congress outlined a resolution to eliminate the consequences of this cult in all spheres of social and political life.

⁵⁰ For more on authoritarian tendencies in Russian society of the late 1990s, see Chapter 3. The process manifested itself clearly in the early 2000s, when the scope of Putin's policies aimed at centralization of government and at control over media became apparent. For a comprehensive survey of Putin's move towards authoritarianism, see, e.g., Leon Aron, "Putinism" (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research Outlook Series), AEI Online (May 2008), online version <<http://www.aei.org/outlook/27958>>, accessed May 7, 2009.

emerges an apologetic trend.⁵¹ On the one hand, the horrors of Stalinism, like inhumanity, paranoia and betrayal, seem to be the primary ideological focus of the film. On the other, it is impossible to miss the camera's loving, lingering treatment of the exceptionally dynamic public space that is dominated by flowing water, interplay of light and shade, bright colors, waiving banners, and people constantly traversing the camera's scope.

The (imagined) festivity of Stalinist everyday culture (which is a no less important subject of the film than the peculiar mindset of the characters under totalitarianism) is juxtaposed in *Moscow Parade* not just with the private tragedies of the characters, but also with a conceptualization that one of the protagonists, a talented young writer, unexpectedly offers. During a stroll, he asks the female protagonist, Anna, for a synonym to the word *prorva* (the Russian title of the film; the approximate translation is *abyss*, with the connotation of the abyss possessing an agency). The writer thinks *prorva* to be the best word to describe that which everyone is afraid of in Russia. He says, "that which everyone is afraid of is just nothing, but this nothing sucks [one] in and destroys." While the writer is saying this, the camera follows his gaze to look at the Kremlin towers yet again, which establishes a striking connection between the "nothing" he speaks of, Russian statehood, and Stalin. Stalin, thus, comes to occupy a markedly ambiguous position within the film, on the margin of existence and non-existence. This assessment is reinforced in one of the film's striking final sequences.

⁵¹ I would not venture here into citing every Russian historian, legitimate and otherwise, who offer apologetic opinion of Stalin's legacy. Symptomatic is the trend in Russian public discourse: in 2004, the speaker of the Russian House of Representatives, the Duma, Boris Gryzlov, offered a characteristic of Stalin as an "exceptional man" (*nezauriadnyi chelovek*), citing the victory in Great Patriotic War and industrialization as Stalin's accomplishments. Gryzlov noted that the social attitude to Stalin "changes with time", therefore in essence outlining the new official position on Stalinism, as Gryzlov himself is a prominent member of the Yedinaia Rossiia Party that was at the time known as Putin's party (See *Izvestiia*, 21 December 2004). In a recent development (2009), another prominent Yedinaia Rossiia member, Sergei Shoigu proposed a bill that essentially prohibits negative assessment of Great Patriotic War.

In that sequence, the Parade that took so much effort on the part of Anna's husband has successfully taken place, and the security officers join other high-ranking members of the military for a ceremonial photo with Stalin in one of Kremlin's majestic halls. Stalin, wearing a snow-white uniform with no insignia, is immediately visible in the front row as everyone is preparing for the picture to be taken. When everyone is finally settled down, one of Stalin's aides approaches him and whispers something to his ear, upon which Stalin immediately leaves, and the gap in the row is quickly filled by one of the security officers. The frame then freezes for a split second, suggesting that the picture has been taken, with no Stalin in it. The temptation to read the episode through Barthes is too tempting: the film does not allow Stalin to be fixed in a photograph, that is, does not allow him to die.⁵² Just as Anna hates her milieu yet cannot let it go, the film itself exposes the evils of Stalinism but at the same time wallows in the Stalinist culture's celebratory magnificence.

The peculiar festive visuality of Stalinist culture is predicated on the peculiar interpretation of mimetic principles of representation, as evident from the iconic Stalinist poster (*Fig. 2*), "Thank you, dear Stalin, for our happy childhood."

⁵² As Barthes puts it in his *Camera Lucida* (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (NY: Macmillan/Hill and Wang, 1983)), "all these young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death. This is the way in which our time assumes Death; with the denying alibi of the distractedly 'alive'" (92), and, earlier, "I am neither the subject nor object [being photographed], but a subject who feels he is becoming an object... I am truly becoming a specter. The Photographer knows very well and himself fears this death in which his *gesture will embalm me* [italics mine. – DK]."



Fig. 2. “Thank you, dear Stalin, for our happy childhood” <davno.ru>

In the poster, two children, a boy and a girl, give the benevolently smiling Stalin bunches of roses, Stalin half-embracing the happy boy; immediately apparent is the glossed-over representation of both Stalin and the generically happy and healthy children. Furthermore, the painting style, evoking pre-revolutionary Russian marketing art with slightly disproportionate figures, softened edges of objects and flattened perspective, projects the image’s ideological goals with innocent, nearly instinctual subtlety. Indeed, while on the surface a realist painting, the poster does not attempt realist representation in the least: both Stalin’s and the boy’s hands are in the wrong positions for either being given roses or holding the bouquet. Stalin, then, projects the festively bright red roses or, otherwise, wears them as medals on his uniform. The poster showcases the Socialist Realist representational principle in action: mimetic principle is easily sacrificed for the sake of creating an ideologically relevant paternal allegory. Though the red roses in the poster “objectively” cannot be in the boy’s hands, they are nonetheless exactly where they should be, projecting a set of stable ideological meanings of celebration and paternal authority as they emanate from Stalin’s figure. Such non-mimetic visuality, paradoxically, is a source of relatively clear ideological messages, and the “effortlessness” of meaning-production

in totalitarian art, as it seems, is at the core of the post-Soviet nostalgia, if not for Stalinism then at least for its artistic method.⁵³

Moscow Parade's nostalgic recreation of the simulacrum of a culture long gone, dominated by the figure of the undead Stalin, is one of the modes which post-Soviet cinema adopts for resurrecting the lost paternal metaphor. This mode consists of rearranging bits and pieces of the Soviet grand narrative,⁵⁴ or, as Nina Tsyrukun puts it, "[building] the new mythology from the ruins of the old [one]."⁵⁵ Tsyrukun argues that the essence of this national mythology remained virtually unshattered in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, while the arrangement of its components has undergone substantial change. The existence of this mythology is predicated on the functional paternal metaphor.⁵⁶

The desire to resurrect the paternal metaphor and the nostalgia for a place structured by ideologically unambiguous symbols come together in post-Soviet cinema when it is asked once again to become "the most important of all arts" (in the words of Vladimir Lenin⁵⁷) to serve the perceived needs of the emergent, state-sanctioned Russian nationalism. A distinct, temptingly beautiful and ideologically charged simulacrum of national past emerges in the films of the later

⁵³ I am elaborating here on the opinion voiced by Svetlana Boym, who, using a Bakhtinian discussion of the carnivalesque to talk about the festive nature of everyday Soviet (that is, Stalinist) culture in its cinematic representation, argues that the social change brought about a kind of solidification and mythologization of the Soviet space, thus creating a place of nostalgia. See Boym 1995, 75-94.

⁵⁴ Making the past a "safe place" shaped by a functional paternal metaphor runs concurrently (and complements) a range of hypermasculine, violent and xenophobic tendencies in post-Soviet cinema. These trends have been read as indicative of the culture's attempts to compensate for the loss of the paternal metaphor. Importantly, Susan Larsen traces the effort to reaffirm national identity within the post-Soviet cinema, arguing that it is realized through conflation of national authority with heroic masculinity that is the major structural trope of the films under her scrutiny. See Susan Larsen, "National Identity, Cultural Authority and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov", in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn 2003); and Nina Tsyrukun, "Tinkling Symbols: Fragmented Society – Fragmented Cinema?", in *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*. Ed. Birgit Beumers (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).

⁵⁵ Tsyrukun, 1999, 62.

⁵⁶ The desire to reaffirm the functionality of paternal metaphor is a continuous current in post-Soviet cinema and sometimes becomes disproportionate: thus, Yana Hashamova, in her analysis of *Koktebel* (2003, dir. Boris Khlebnikov), demonstrates that "film [*Koktebel*] insists on the resurrected father even if it contradicts the logic of the narratives and the characters" (Yana Hashamova, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film* (Bristol/Chicago, Intellect, 2007), 120).

⁵⁷ Lenin's famous maxim states that "Of all the arts, the cinema is for us the most important".

nineties and early 2000s, its way paved by the mechanisms of musealization and problematic nostalgic idealization discussed above. Populated by larger-than-life characters, visually stunning, seemingly ideologically sound, this cinematic model of the past is hyperreal because, in an attempt to recreate a teleological version of national history, it looks for the points of contiguity between the imaginary Russia of olden days and the Soviet culture.

In its late-nineties cinematic construction, Russian national history reacquires some continuity because the strategies associated with representing the Russia of the old and the representational strategies of Socialist Realism have a number of striking similarities. The idealized national past is allowed to emerge in its peculiar, ideologically charged visuality because it is filtered through the conceptual legacy of Socialist Realism.⁵⁸

The Rise of Ornamental Nationalism: Russia, *Lubok*-Style, in Nikita Mikhalkov's *The Barber of Siberia*.

The Debate on the Role of Cinema.

Russian cinema of the 1990s, of course, was not homogeneously indulging in the aesthetics of *chernukha*. There was another trend in early post-Soviet cinema that Julian Graffy⁵⁹ calls the “[cinema of] healing myths for an age of uncertainty,”⁶⁰ featuring compelling narratives and “catering to popular taste.”⁶¹ While scholars of post-Soviet Russian cinema uncover the centripetal⁶² forces at work in cinema in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Graffy

⁵⁸ The hyperreality of Russian national past in the cinema of the late 1990s and early 2000s has another source: aside from having to juggle the “domestic” sources of symbols associated with the past, this cinematic model of the past attempts (and fails) to digest a number of visual and narrative conventions offered by contemporary Hollywood cinema.

⁵⁹ Graffy 1999, 161-179.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 176.

⁶¹ Ibid., 161

⁶² I am borrowing this extremely lucky term from Birgit Beumers, “To Moscow! To Moscow? The Russian Hero and the Loss of the Centre.” In *Russia On Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema (KINO - The Russian*

notes that younger filmmakers like Dmitrii Askrakhan turn, in their popular “amusing dramas,” to the traditional Russian myths responsible for identity formation (self-sacrifice, resourceful self-help) and to the metaphor of family to provide a boost of “vital energy” for their spectators.

However, the cinema of Astrakhan, as well as a number of films from the early and mid-1990 that do not bother raising existential questions and provide for honest and relatively mindless entertainment (like Vladimir Men’shov’s *Shirly-Myrly* (1995) and Aleksandr Rogozhkin’s *Osobennosti Natsional’noi Okhoty* (*Peculiarities of the National Hunt*, 1995)), seem to be nonexistent in the arguments put forward at the Third Congress of the Filmmakers’ Union in 1997. These arguments portray Russian national cinema as unnecessarily artistic, too experimental, too serious and viewer-unfriendly.

Film director Daniil Dondurei addressed the Third Congress,⁶³ speaking of the economic progress that the industry had made since 1991 in a celebratory fashion. Nevertheless, Dondurei criticized the Russian filmmakers, essentially, for their inability to cater to the tastes of the public. The total absence of state control in post-Soviet cinema, for Dondurei, had created a situation where filmmakers indulged in the newly-found artistic freedom, experimenting with modes of representation and violent and/or depressive content.

Why does Dondurei overlook films like those of Astrakhan, Men’shov, and Rogozhkin? Cinema, for Dondurei, appears to need to have a “serious”, socially relevant message, which “low-art” slapstick comedies like *Shirly-Myrly* evidently lack. This is the most surprising part of Dondurei’s address; after nearly a decade when Russian cinema had no “goals” (such rhetoric having been firmly associated with party-sanctioned Soviet public discourse on art), Dondurei

Cinema) (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999. 76-91). 87. In this essay, Beumers explores fragmentation of national space in post-Soviet cinema.

⁶³ See Daniil Dondurei, “The State of National Cinema” (December 1997), in *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*. Ed. Birgit Beumers (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 46-50.

communicates the need to establish these goals. He turns back to a purely Socialist Realist formula to speak about art and cinema: “art, above all, is a means to model future successfully,” Dondurei says. This retort to Soviet rhetoric is symptomatic of the problems the institution of Russian national cinema had to face. Identifying the industry’s goals, for the Congress, was not an unexpected “blast from the past”, but instead a way to cope with a number of challenges, ranging from economic (decline of viewership, little to no government support) to ideological (acutely perceived “Americanization”, absence of national ideology) that post-Soviet cinema encountered in the 1990s.

What was wrong with *chernukha*’s undoubtedly serious, socially relevant messages? The problem was that by the later 1990s, these messages were ill-suited for contributing to the emergent ideology of the new Russian state. *Chernukha* films reflected the post-Soviet reality too well, yet not only the bleakness of *chernukha* was the issue in the debate about the goals of national cinema of the late 1990s. The identity-reasserting cinema of Astrakhan and the post-Soviet slapstick comedy that gently satirized the post-Soviet social reality did provide for both “positive” messages and viewer’s entertainment. Nonetheless, these films could contribute as little to the project of reconstructing the Russian national(ist) ideology underway in the later 1990s as *chernukha* could. This is because their subject, too, was contemporary post-Soviet reality: while the *chernukha* approached it critically and philosophically, films like *Shirly-Myrly* presented a panorama of post-Soviet culture, with iconic markers of social change (like criminals in posh suits driving expensive cars) and markedly Western additions to Russian urban landscape (like Coca-Cola billboards).

Shirly-Myrly juxtaposes these markers with the satirized remnants of the Soviet past, like boorish servers in restaurants, corrupt police and drunken hospital personnel. The exceptionally

diverse post-Soviet panorama in *Shirly-Myrly* is overflowing with seemingly disconnected symbols: post-Soviet social reality *in general* proved to be too eclectic, devoid of clear dichotomies, and unmanageable, to provide cultural tropes for building up a new national(ist) ideology. The post-Soviet present, no matter whether it was presented in films in its existential *chernukha* incarnation or in its abysmally carnivalesque absurdity, was not exactly what the functionaries of Russian cinema had in mind when they spoke about the need to produce a socially relevant and positive message. The post-Soviet present, suspended between the Socialist past and the uncertain future, could not function as a setting for such a message, because there was nothing certain about it, nothing that could be made into an easily interpretable message, and thus nothing that could serve as a basis for a solid ideological construction.

This “unsuitability” of the country’s present for the emergent national(ist) ideology explains Russian cinema’s eventual programmatic fallback to the representational principle that sounded suspiciously Socialist Realist: social reality now had to be constructed, not “reflected.” What should Russian cinema show now that it, again, has a goal?

Any national(ist) ideology understandably turns to the national past in search for the continuities of culture. The importance of national cinema in Russia’s search for the national past—the cinema’s ability to, essentially, construct a national ideology—was evident already in 1992, when the title of Stanislav Govorukhin’s documentary, *The Russia That We Have Lost* (*Rossiia, Kotoruiu My Poteriali*) became “the mantra for a widespread sense of nostalgia for a Russia that is imagined to have existed as an organic whole before it was betrayed by the Bolsheviks.”⁶⁴ Govorukhin’s documentary imagines pre-revolutionary Russia to be a prosperous,

⁶⁴ See McCausland 23.

culturally rich place,⁶⁵ mapping Russia's potential ways of economic and cultural development.⁶⁶ Govorukhin's film imagines what would have been if World War I and the Revolution of 1917 had not happened, outlining and largely solidifying the nostalgic sentiment in post-Soviet culture.

When the (arguably) most influential contemporary Russian film director, Nikita Mikhalkov addressed the Extraordinary Congress of the Filmmakers' Union (1998),⁶⁷ his speech was a manifesto of strengthening governmental control over cinema and of the revival of nationalist rhetoric surrounding film production in Russia in the late 1990s. In the address, Mikhalkov stressed the political reasons to produce "positive" films instead of economic ones. That Mikhalkov is more concerned with the issues of nation-building than with the industry's profits is significant: by 1998, the Russian government, with which Mikhalkov has long been firmly associated,⁶⁸ thought it was ready to invest in cinema, having rediscovered the value of cinema as an ideological tool just as it sought to "strengthen the vertical of power" (the government rhetoric of the time⁶⁹).

⁶⁵ However idealizing Govorukhin's vision is, the last ten years of the XIX century (and up to the First Russian Revolution of 1905) were indeed a period of relative economic stability; furthermore, the Silver Age of Russian culture falls roughly into the same period. Similar nostalgic sentiment towards the late XIX century will be seen in Mikhalkov's *The Barber of Siberia*.

⁶⁶ There emerges a whole trend of cultural texts operating on the same premise of "what would have been," prompting what I call post-Soviet "nostalgic potentiology" and manifested in the heightened attention to the genre of alternative history. For more on this, see Chapter 4, esp. the analysis of the film *First on the Moon*.

⁶⁷ See Nikita Mikhalkov, "The Function of National Cinema" (May 1998), in *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*. Ed. Birgit Beumers (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 50-56.

⁶⁸ Mikhalkov, a son of the author of the Soviet national anthem, came to national prominence at the age of 18, when he played the sweet young boy Kolya in Georgii Daneliia's *I Step Through Moscow* (Ia shagaiu po Moskve, 1963). The title song from the film is known by virtually every Soviet (and post-Soviet) citizen. In the early nineties, Mikhalkov, by then a successful actor, director and businessman, became president of Russian Cultural Fund (1993), and since then the list of his government affiliations exponentially expands to include more than twenty government-affiliated positions. He then became the President of Russian Filmmakers' Union.

⁶⁹ The "vertical of power" refers to hierarchy of executive branch of Russian government, which was the focus of reform immediately upon Putin's ascent to power. The most significant of those reforms were the reform of the Upper House of Russian parliament, the Duma, in 2000-2002, whereby elections into this House were eliminated, its members to be appointed by the President; and consolidation of Russian regional governments into larger "federal districts", their heads too appointed by the President.

In the address, Mikhalkov, spicing up the Socialist Realist formula with some Cold War rhetoric, calls cinema “our most powerful weapon” and even warns that this weapon can be “seized by our enemies and turned upon us.”⁷⁰ For Mikhalkov at least, Russian cinema now identifies itself with state power. The role of national cinema within such a framework can only be to explore all things national, from identity to history to landscape.

Mikhalkov had little doubt about the mode of such exploration. His 1999 film, *The Barber of Siberia*, creates a cinematic mode of (re)constructing Russianness through nostalgic idealization of pre-revolutionary Russia. Mikhalkov’s film infuses the mythical vision of Russian history with the tropes and visual strategies that it imagines to signify Russianness. These tropes and strategies bind several (“real” or imaginary) periods of Russian history together into an unexpected aesthetic continuity. This allows *The Barber* to create a nostalgic cinematic space where the modern viewer can wallow in “larger than life” characters, emotionally charged plots, and, most importantly, visually striking imagery that all come together to project a variety of ideological messages. In the words of Yana Hashamova,

Historical time in this film [*The Barber of Siberia*]... is constructed as linear time, as progression, project, and teleology... [T]he film attempts to advance a national identity that is rooted in the certainty of a celebrated mythical past presented as reality, thereby avoiding the dilemmas confronting the present.⁷¹

Nikita Mikhalkov’s *The Barber of Siberia*: Imagining a Cultural Continuity.

The Barber is perhaps the most extensively studied post-Soviet film; mentioning it, even if in passing, is seemingly imperative for any study of post-Soviet cinema. This is not in the least due to the project’s sheer magnitude in terms of production, distribution and reception. In 1999,

⁷⁰ Mikhalkov 1999, 52.

⁷¹ Hashamova 69.

The Barber was the most expensive film in the history of Russian cinema, with a budget of around \$40 million (only nine years later to be matched by Fyodor Bondarchuk's sci-fi blockbuster *The Inhabited Island* (*Obitaiemyi Ostrov*, 2009)). With a sprawling runtime of 180 minutes, an unprecedented promotional campaign⁷² (with a tagline, "He's a Russian. That explains a lot"), and an international cast featuring the Russian A-list ageing heartthrob Oleg Men'shikov and Hollywood's own Julia Ormond as star-crossed lovers, the film attracted much critical attention because the film's production was immediately deemed to be full of excesses.⁷³ These excesses directly translated into the film's equally excessive content, both in terms of visuality and of the ideology that this visuality projects.

The opening shot of *The Barber* shows vast stretches of presumably Siberian coniferous forest filmed from above, while the opening credits reveal an interesting (and most likely intentional) "mistake." While many post-Soviet films mention their government agency sponsor in the opening credits,⁷⁴ the credit in *The Barber* simply says "The film was made with the support of Russian Federation" ("*fil'm sniat pri gosudarstvennoi podderzhke Rossiiskoi Federatsii*"), presenting the film as a result of a collective national effort. The film's unmistakably populist and nationalist message is thus conveyed on the meta-cinematic level. If the viewer does not catch this, as I did not the first several times I saw the film, the message still

⁷² Stephen M. Norris, "Tsarist Russia, *Lubok* Style: Nikita Mikhalkov's *Barber of Siberia* (1999) and Post-Soviet National Identity", in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. Vol. 25, No. 1, March 2005, 101-118, 110-112.

⁷³ For a discussion of the film's "excessiveness" through Peter Brooks's theory of melodrama, see Susan Larsen, "National Identity, Cultural Authority and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov", in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn 2003), 494. For a survey of "excesses" of production and distribution, see Norris 2005.

⁷⁴ Most often, the Russian Federation's State Committee of Cinematography.

lingers in the old (pre-Revolution) spelling of the film's title: the *iota* and the *yer*, letters that fell into disuse after the early Bolshevik spelling reform, feature prominently in the title.⁷⁵

One critic writes, "[Mikhalkov] tells a love story without a happy ending, one that runs counter to Hollywood films, but he tells it in the most Hollywood-like film ever made in Russian history."⁷⁶ Indeed, a perceived artificiality⁷⁷ of the film's plot is likely a result of simultaneous denial of and reliance on the plot conventions of classic Hollywood narrative cinema. *The Barber's* dramatic plot, complete with secret children, phantasmagorical forest-shaving machines and vast panoramas of the Imperial Russia, provides for Hollywood-style entertainment, at the same time concerning itself with the "eternal questions" that are a marked departure from the entertainment paradigm. Mikhalkov, nonetheless, steers the plot between a compelling narrative and a conventional Russian critique of Hollywood as mere entertainment.⁷⁸

It was not the film's relationship with Hollywood, however, but its "message," that was strikingly unusual for the time. In the words of Stephen Norris, "Mikhalkov presents a more positive look at Russia and its values, morals and heritage than other films of the 1990s, which tended to portray the bleakness that had set in after communism's fall."⁷⁹ Indeed, in a seemingly straightforward attempt to reclaim the national past, the film turns to the reign of Alexander III (1881-1894), which in post-Soviet historiography is perceived as the last relatively stable period

⁷⁵ This evokes the public interest in pre-Revolution spelling which emerged in Russia in the 1990s. Such spelling, associated with national tradition and historical continuity, prompted in the 1990s a social phenomenon of "Slavianizing" the spelling of many company names. Of these, several prominent ones remain to this day, most importantly, the Kommersant newspaper that crowns its final "t" with a silent *yer*, adding a traditionalist flavor to a markedly "capitalist" notion.

⁷⁶ Norris 2005, 103-104. The article is written before Timur Bekmambetov's explicit adoption of Hollywood blockbuster model (in terms of visuality and production/distribution, and, to a lesser extent, of the film's themes) to Russian cinema with his *Night Watch* and *Day Watch* (2004-06).

⁷⁷ See, e.g., Tat'iana Moskvina, Ne govori, chto molodost' slubila, in *Iskusstvo Kino*, 1999, #6, online version available at: <<http://www.kinoart.ru/1999/6/4.html>>.

⁷⁸ A common anti-Hollywood sentiment in Russian cinema is predicated on the dichotomy of high and low art and contains claims of Hollywood cinema's shallowness in its pursuit of profit. For a case study of Russian cinema's "denial" of and dependence on Hollywood, see Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. 233-236.

⁷⁹ Norris 104.

in Russian history.⁸⁰ The highly moral and very attractive protagonist is inscribed into the landscape that repeatedly assures the viewer that it is a *national* landscape. The film insistently flaunts nearly every symbolic marker of Russianness: the church cupolas, the golden-leaved birches, Russian flags and double-headed eagles, and peasants in traditional dress and folk festivities all dominate the visual field. The past to be reclaimed by *The Barber*, however, is far from being unproblematic. Yana Hashamova argues that

Mikhalkov, [...] disappointed in the dark and hopeless filmic representations of Russia's current reality, certainly offers aspects of the past, but he does so only to idealize it [...] Mikhalkov creates a mythic visual world, in which viewers cannot conceive of the present and the future without the symbolic configuration of the past.⁸¹

The film mythologizes Russian history: this is evident from the inconsistency between *The Barber*'s implicitly proclaimed historicity (evident from the film's panoramic approach that inscribes the characters' stories into a detailed reconstruction of everyday life) and the little effort that went into concealing the act of mythmaking. Indeed, scholarship on *The Barber* notes that "viewers have had numerous difficulties with the representation of history in this film."⁸² Critics and historians have noted a myriad of historical inaccuracies in the film's portrayal of the era.⁸³ Hashamova mentions that

Mikhalkov constructs the historical mystification as reality and transforms illusion into truth. Such transformations of selective and manipulated historical episodes into real

⁸⁰ As discussed above, the late XIX century is a period in Russian history particularly prone to idealizing; interestingly, Mikhalkov goes against the grain of his own idealization project by including an (inaccurate) historical reference to terrorism (Norris explains that by the time the events of the film are claimed to take place, the wave of domestic terrorism (by Socialist anarchist organizations like *Narodnaya Volia*) has already subsided) in order to be able to emphasize the protagonist's acquisition of heroic masculinity through the set of challenging encounters, one of those with terrorists.

⁸¹ Hashamova 69

⁸² Hashamova 67.

⁸³ In and of itself, this is a somewhat unexpected consideration, given that film's main plot vehicle is a phantasmatic contraption of a logging machine.

history and the insistence on truthfulness and credibility underlie the ideological discourse of the film and its teleological orientation.⁸⁴

While the film's claim to historical objectivity, then, falls apart upon any attempt at verification, it seems that *The Barber*'s portrayal of the era is in a way "truthful", if not objective. The "genuine" nature of historical representation in the film stems not from its mimetically accurate reconstruction of the era (just as it was the case with *City Zero* and *Moscow Parade*). Instead, the film builds up on a set of visual tropes that appeal to the imaginary construct of "genuine Russianness" without explicitly defining what this "Russianness" might mean.

The representation of history in the film, as early critics noticed, bears a striking conceptual similarity to the traditional genre of Russian popular art, the *lubok*: an early review of the film notes that it is a "Mercedes 600⁸⁵ pretending to be a *lubok*."⁸⁶ The *lubok*, a unique Russian popular print featuring allegorical images with short texts squeezed in often-rhyming formulas,⁸⁷ according to Norris, who studies *The Barber* in the context of the *lubok*,

[became] a source of propaganda and a means through which Russians began to conceive of their place within Russian nation [in the seventeenth and eighteenth century]... [T]he *lubok* was one of the most important cultural products that entered into a large percentage of Russian's [sic] homes... the popular prints helped a largely illiterate population to understand Russia's [wartime] conflicts, and they also helped Russians to imagine

⁸⁴ Hashamova 68.

⁸⁵ The automobile that has become an iconic marker of post-Soviet culture's period of "wild capitalism" of the early 1990s.

⁸⁶ Norris 101.

themselves to be part of Russia... Ultimately, the tsarist print provided ideas about what made Russia 'Russia.'⁸⁸

The *lubok* conveyed its message through simplified, allegorical figures; it was this simplification of complex social and political notions that prompted the nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals to resent the *lubok*, perceived as “a synonym for anything coarse and cheap... a source of propaganda that shaped the masses and made them compliant.”⁸⁹ This position largely shapes the negative domestic reviews of *The Barber* that characterize the film as “a Russian souvenir.”⁹⁰ In Norris’s reading, Mikhalkov’s glossed-over representation of Russian history shares with the *lubok* an implicit goal of popularizing ideology. Norris writes, “Many believed that Mikhalkov was attempting to sell an outdated patriotism that glossed over the tsarist past... this fear corresponds with similar feelings among Russian elites in the nineteenth century about the *lubok*, who often referred to it as ‘artistic garbage.’”⁹¹

The similarities of *The Barber* and the *lubok* do not end here. Russian film theorist Neia Zorkaia calls the *lubok* “the first post-folkloric stage of mass art, first evidence of folklorism [in Russian culture].”⁹² For Zorkaia, folklorism, the rediscovery of what is perceived to be a body of genuine cultural heritage (folklore itself), becomes particularly relevant for the cultures in transition looking to redefine their identities,⁹³ like late-Soviet and early post-Soviet culture. While, according to Norris, Russian intellectuals tend to use the term *lubok* as a negative label for cultural products, Zorkaia’s argument is concerned not with the judgment of *lubok*’s artistic value but with examining the relationship of the *lubok* art to the system of artistic genres and to

⁸⁸ Norris 102.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 102.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁹¹ Ibid., 112.

⁹² See Neia Zorkaia, *Fol'klor, Lubok, Ekran* (Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1994), 17.

⁹³ This is in opposition to many Western folklorists who define folklorism as a “fake-lore,” a commercialized/popularized use of folklore. For a survey of definitions of folklorism, see Guntis Šmidchens, “Folklorism Revisited”, in *Journal of Folklore Research* (Vol. 36, # 1), 51-70, esp. 51-52.

cultural chronologies. The *lubok* art, Zorkaia claims, “constantly [mixes] genres and types of [texts], transplants and transforms them into one another... [A]nother important feature is... its eclecticism, formed by bringing together different chronological layers [of culture].”⁹⁴

Lubok’s eclecticism and semantic compression are strategies that *The Barber* applies to the Russian national history. The “goal” of a *lubok* print is to communicate an ideologized message by simplifying this message, complemented by a set of manipulative rhetorical strategies. No matter how “inaccurate” the representation of national history is in *The Barber*, the film does not bother to conceal this inaccuracy because it is not after the authentic history. Out of the film’s manipulation of history arises a solid, mythological space of pre-revolutionary Russia, a vast country of subdued beauty where not only is the paternal metaphor functional, it is also unquestionably appealing. An often-discussed scene in the film features a graduation ceremony in the beautiful Kremlin inner plaza: the protagonist, with his cadet friends, listens to the Tsar giving an inspirational speech, the shots of the Tsar’s benevolent face intercut with those of the cadets who look like they are madly in love with the Tsar. Whether or not the Tsar’s speeches at military academy graduations are an accurate, verifiable historical detail is, of course, irrelevant. While the historical detail may or may not be “fake”, the mechanism of cinematic identification ensures that the spectator partakes in the illusion of a genuine feeling (achieved by the actors’ very convincing performances) and, by extension, in the illusion of a functional paternal metaphor.

The Barber does not just make use of the *lubok*’s rhetorical strategies. The *lubok*’s peculiar visual aesthetics, too, provide a potential source for a post-Soviet nationalist iconography. Norris notes that “among certain members of the Russian educated classes... the

⁹⁴ Zorkaia 50.

prints became associated with peasant culture and the search for ‘authentic Russia.’”⁹⁵ This is because the *lubok* relies heavily on Slavic (pre-Christian) art in its ornamentality, infusing it with the conventions of Russian Orthodox iconography. An Orthodox icon is not supposed to represent its subject truthfully, instead attempting to capture God’s essence. This implicitly anti-mimetic, allegorical aspect of Orthodox iconography is picked up by the *lubok* and directly translates into *The Barber*’s representation of history. The *lubok*’s use of elaborate, ornamental detail that makes its imagery “larger than life,” literally as well figuratively, explicitly invites one to read the *lubok* image not by “matching” it with real-life objects but by assuming the image is a metaphor for something and thus needs to be unpacked.

In this way, Russian cinema functionaries’ appeal to return to Socialist Realist principles of representation of life as it should be – bright, beautiful, populated with characters who are “better” and certainly more inspiring than whatever Russian social reality of the late 1990s had to offer – intersects with and makes use of the principles of *lubok* popular art. This art is accessible, allegorical, ornamental, not pretending to be a truthful reflection of “reality.” In the set of scenes in *The Barber* depicting Shrovetide festival (*Maslenitsa*, Pancake Week), the female protagonist, Jane, and her companion have to navigate the vast space on the banks of Moskva River peppered with semi-permanent wooden kiosks where people in peasant dress sell *blinis* (pancakes) with caviar, vodka, and crafts. The Shrovetide festival is chosen as a setting to showcase the excess of “Russianness,” complete with half-naked men on the ice of the river who are about to engage in the customary group fistfight. Their blood is so bright and their bodies so prominent against the white snow that the 19th-century Russian peasants consuming caviar along with the aristocracy stop presenting any conceptual problem for the spectator. Everything being shown is taken to the extreme – the too-bright colors of clothing, the elaborate pyrotechnics that

⁹⁵ Norris 102.

find some unexpected way to the festival and mark a high point of the celebration, the more-aggressive-than-usual montage that attempts to capture simultaneity of many movements, the running children, the close-ups of smiling faces and bloody mouths in the fistfight scene etc.

When the female protagonist of *The Barber* first arrives to Moscow, she offers the following opinion: “It looks like a Turkish mosque, but brighter and cleaner.” Her observation sums the film’s mode of dealing with pre-revolutionary Russia’s iconography: the cadets’ uniforms are wrinkle-less and spotless even after the shootout in one of the earlier scenes of the film; the general’s shot glass is sparkling; the teeth of the fistfighters in the Shrovetide sequence are snow-white in their bloody mouths. Even the scene where the male protagonist is sent to Siberia features a grand, orderly, spotless hall of a train station, filled with prisoners in overalls of a distinctly flattering fit.

Borrowing visual conventions from the *lubok* aesthetic allows *The Barber* to take a circuitous path in its return to the principles of representation informed by Socialist Realism. The discredited Communist ideology no longer able to back up the mythological construction of the historical era, the film appeals to what is perceived to be the genuine “roots” of Russian culture. The *lubok* iconography in *The Barber* compresses multiple ideological messages into the festive cinematic space in a manner very similar El’dar Riazanov’s 1956 classic *Carnival Night* - though no historian would venture to argue that either the folk festival of Shrovetide, the centerpiece of *The Barber*, or the lavish New Year celebration in *Carnival Night* are accurate representations of their respective historical periods. The carnivalesque festivity of Socialist Realism is replaced in *The Barber* by another type of carnivalesque festivity; as one aesthetic is substituted for the other, a certain Soviet-post-Soviet cultural continuum emerges as the Socialist Realist aesthetic

is nostalgically lingered upon in *Moscow Parade* and then exchanged for another one with strikingly similar conditions of visibility and representational goals, in *The Barber*.

Mikhalkov's visual version of pre-revolutionary Russia most resembles the nostalgically glossed-over version of Russia as it appears in paintings of Boris Kustodiev (1878-1927). Kustodiev's contribution to Russian art is popularly known as "Kustodiev's Russia" (*kustodievskaiia Rossiia*), a rubric for his series of portraits and landscapes of a peculiar, nostalgic festivity. Russian art historians generally assess Kustodiev's art, rediscovered in the late 1980s, as utopian,⁹⁶ noting the discrepancy between "real" life in pre-revolutionary Russia and Kustodiev's representation thereof. Kustodiev's paintings, for the critics, are naturalist reflections of people's dreams about happy fulfilling life.⁹⁷

Kustodiev described his artistic method as follows: "I never paint from life, my paintings are a fruit of my imagination, of my fantasy. They are called "naturalist" only because [stylistically] they produce an impression of real life, which, however, I have never seen and which never existed."⁹⁸ Kustodiev's apologetic remark reveals that the mimetic illusion is perhaps too successful in his paintings, the excess of staged festivity concealing the non-naturalist elements like flattened perspective, too-clearly-shaped objects and too-bright colors.

This was why Soviet art critics initially eagerly accepted Kustodiev's unmistakably modernist art, dealing, thematically and stylistically, with the mythological representation of Russian culture. Though only one Kustodiev's painting, *Bolshevik* (1920), can fit the thematic mold of revolutionary art, his "Festivals" series too was in line with the mythmaking machine of the nascent Socialist Realist project. The ease with which Kustodiev's modernist panoramic

⁹⁶ See N. Dokuchaieva, "Kustodiev i Russkaia Narodnaia Utopia", in *Iskusstvo*, 1985, # 12, 59-67.

⁹⁷ Interestingly, this opinion carries over from Soviet to post-Soviet art historians: Mark Etkind (Mark Etkind, *Boris Kustodiev: paintings, graphic works, book illustrations, theatrical designs* (Leningrad, Avropa, 1983)) and V. Kruglov (V. Kruglov, *Kustodiev* (Moskva: Zolotoi Vek, 2007)) express very similar opinions.

⁹⁸ S.P. Ostanina, *Entsiklopediia Naturmorta* (Moscow, OLMA-Press, 2002), 137.

“dreamscapes” were accepted as a reflection of Russian tradition attests not only to Boris Groys’s observation about the inherently modernist nature of Socialist Realist project,⁹⁹ but also to the conceptual interconnectedness of modernist visual mythmaking, Socialist Realism, and the *lubok*.

Indeed, in a famous historical snippet, when one of Kustodiiev’s most recognizable pieces from the “Festivals” series, *Maslenitsa (Shrovetide Festival)*, 1916) was considered for purchase by Russian Academy of Art, the arguments against the purchase called the painting a *lubok*, deeming it artistically unfit to grace the Academy’s collection. In these exact same words, the film critics of the late 1990s would lambast *The Barber*, a film that evokes not only Kustodiiev’s manner of arranging figures and objects in the space of a folk festival, but also the painter’s bright, somewhat garish color palette in staging its Shrovetide scene.¹⁰⁰



Fig. 3. Portrait of Fyodor Shalyapin (Boris Kustodiiev, 1922), detail

⁹⁹ Boris Groys proposes in his *The Total Art of Stalinism* that the “Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by the means of a total aesthetico-political project” (see Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 36. Groys, then, establishes a continuity between Russian modernism and Socialist Realism.

¹⁰⁰ Consider Fig. 3 and 4. The structural element that connects the two images is, of course, the bright balloons (in the colors of Russian flag). Similar balloons are the centerpiece of one of the versions of Kustodiiev’s *Maslenitsa*.



Fig. 4. Shrovetide Festival in *The Barber of Siberia*

The excess of visuality in *The Barber*, borrowed from the Russian *lubok* tradition and used to advance the politics of representation similar to those of Socialist Realist art, becomes a vehicle to ground Russian national history in a concrete, elaborately detailed, ornate space. Even if this space is a cinematic illusion, in it the mesmerizing ornamentality of Russian folk art finally meets Socialist Realist mythmaking. This is possible because the excessive visuality of the film allows for actualizing national history in the cinematic space. *The Barber* clings to a panoramic representation of various facets of everyday life and makes these facets look beautiful, thus materializing the time of Russian history in the cinematic space. This Bakhtinian move,¹⁰¹ in Hashamova's reading, "transform[s] the small and the insignificant of everyday life into profound history, [therefore making] national time ... concrete and localized,"¹⁰² ready to enter into the post-Soviet figuration of national history.

Catherine Merridale, an historian of contemporary Russia, argues that

¹⁰¹ Bakhtin's term means a unity of spatio-temporal elements "makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins.... Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements ... gravitate towards the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work" (Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics", in *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 250).

¹⁰² Hashamova 68.

Even when Communist power had gone and even as some Gulag camps were turning into tourist destinations, the old Soviet mentality ..., Soviet language ... and Soviet expectations of the future ... thrived within people's minds. There was never a decisive turn away from these values and nothing has emerged since that competes with them. Stalin's ghost still walks, in other words, and, though it is easy to condemn the Kremlin's new occupants for invoking it in their pursuit of power and wealth, the strategy could work only because a large proportion of Russia's people was ready to welcome the old villain home with open arms.¹⁰³

It is not Stalin per se, but what he stands for in the cultural memory, that becomes the structuring metaphor of post-Soviet nostalgia for a utopian vision of history. The strategies of representation that the films discussed here employ, musealization, idealization and ornamental excess, reaffirm the mythic existence of the utopia by actively constructing the national past as a cinematic space that behaves “as if” it was genuine. It is in this “over-constructed” space, paradoxically, that the non-existence of “genuine” Russianness, the non-existence exposed by the gap in national history that the end of the Soviet state created, can be happily forgotten for the duration of the cinematic illusion.

¹⁰³ Catherine Merridale, “Haunted by Stalin”, in *History Today*, Vol.59 (9), 2009, online version available at <<http://www.historytoday.com/MainArticle.aspx?m=33607&amid=30288428>>.

CHAPTER 3¹

The Future-in-the-past: Post-Soviet Dystopia.

Situating Post-Soviet Dystopia

The “overconstruction” of the past at work in post-Soviet film is, as we have seen, a function of post-Soviet nostalgia. In this chapter, I will trace the post-Soviet treatment of another historical category, the future. The starting point of my argument is that the historical future, a source of Soviet utopian fantasies, is seemingly (and expectedly) deconstructed in post-Soviet texts as the Soviet teleological model of history falls apart in the 1990s. The scarce visions of the future of Russia produced in the 1990s and beyond attest to the shift in the mode of imagining the future from utopian to dystopian. Yet, the nostalgic memory of Soviet utopia makes post-Soviet texts craft extremely ambivalent fantasies of the future of Russia, creating textual sites that metaphorize the tension between the “good” and the “bad” parts of the Soviet legacy characteristic of the post-Soviet imagination. Nostalgia for the illusionary stability of the Soviet state counteracts the horrors of totalitarianism in post-Soviet dystopias: metaphorizing the workings of the Soviet state, these texts imagine places where the totalitarian regimes violently punish transgression (as they should), but also, unexpectedly, offer symbolic (and magical) protection to the subjects within the dystopian milieus.

Two major dystopian post-Soviet texts, Tatiana Tolstaia’s 2001 novel, *The Slynx*, and Vladimir Sorokin’s *The Day of the Oprichnik* (2006), are both set in the future, after a more or less apocalyptic event. In *The Slynx*, the dystopian premise is the nuclear Blast

¹ A version of a part of this chapter appeared in: Daria Kabanova, “The Animal Watches You: Identity ‘After’ History in Tatiana Tolstaia’s *The Slynx*”. In *The Other Animals: Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History*, Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson, eds. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2010. 219-234.

that produces a range of genetic mutations, while in *The Day of the Oprichnik* it is the restoration of authoritarian monarchy in Russia, accompanied by rapid globalization, that radically reshape society. Both Tolstaia and Sorokin's novels describe totalitarian societies where the secret police reigns supreme, and thus at first glance conform to the classic model of dystopia that has become a staple of European and American literatures in the 20th century. However, upon closer look, a very important difference becomes apparent: though the texts claim to be set in the future, just like the classic dystopias of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, this future turns out to be modeled on recognizable periods or episodes of the Russian national past. In *The Slynx*, Russian society after the Blast is thrown back to feudalism; in *The Day of the Oprichnik*, the new Tsar of Russia reinstalls the viciously violent Secret Police of Ivan the Terrible, the *oprichnina*, as the all-controlling state institution. These dystopias seem to relive the national past; yet, in an interview, Sorokin offered a revealing comment on *The Day of the Oprichnik*, claiming that it is "of course a book about the present."²

Are post-Soviet dystopias "about" the past, the present, or the future, then? Why should the cautionary tales of the future coming out of post-Soviet Russia be so utterly non-futuristic? Where does the compulsion to repeat history come from? In this chapter, I will attempt to trace the reasons for this unlikely conceptualization of what the future should not be. I will read three representative dystopias from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, examining the mechanisms and sources of post-apocalyptic chronotopes of post-Soviet dystopias. In order to explore why post-Soviet dystopias recreate the past rather than conventionally construct the future, I will start by building up on the argument put

²“Russia Is Slipping Back into an Authoritarian Empire”: Spiegel Interview with Author Vladimir Sorokin, Spiegel”, trans. Christopher Sultan, in *Spiegel*, Feb 2, 2007.
< <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,463860,00.html>>, accessed Jun 10, 2009.

forward by Mikhail Epstein and complemented by Dragan Kujundžić. In this argument, the collapse of the Soviet Union put post-Soviet culture in its own “post-apocalyptic” context, destroying the Soviet teleological model of history and the notion of a common national future³ with its utopian meanings. In this context, post-Soviet Russian culture loses not just the utopian future, but the future altogether, because it is, so to speak, situated “after” the ultimate point of the future, the apocalypse, on the conventional historical timeline.

Is the genre of dystopia at all possible in this context? Sorokin’s “of course” refers to the classic convention of dystopian fiction: by moving the setting to the future, the dystopian text creates a textual space for social commentary that is conceptually safe from allegations of being a social critique of contemporary society, because, after all, what is being critiqued is not the sociopolitical milieu contemporary to the text, but a fictional society of the future. The utopian sentiment, then, is constitutive of the very genre of dystopia, because the existence of the genre is predicated on the idea that there *can* be a textual space (conceptualized as a temporal category, the future) that will be politically safe enough so that the much-needed social critique can be provided from it.

Though the concealed utopian sentiment is the implicit premise of dystopian fiction, the Soviet Union was no place for dystopia: the scarce texts that portray dystopian societies either predate Socialist Realism (Yevgenii Zamyatin’s *We*, 1920) or are associated with Socialist science fiction (most notably, Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii’s *Prisoners of Power*, 1969), which uses a dystopian society as a counterpoint to the utopian Communist society of the future (which is the primary subject of its scope).

³ As shown by Epstein 1995 and Dragan Kujundžić “After: Russian Post-Colonial Identity”. MLN, Vol. 115, # 5, Comparative Literature Issue. (Dec., 2000), 892-908.

It was only in 1986 that an explicitly dystopian text, Vladimir Voinovich's *Moscow 2042*, was published outside of Russia. The absence of dystopia from "mainstream" Soviet literature was the result of the tightly controlled Soviet literary production on the one hand, and of the utopian nature of Socialist Realism,⁴ on the other. The post-Soviet dystopia, then, should theoretically find itself in the opposition to utopian, perennially optimistic implications of the Socialist Realist method. The Socialist Realist maxim to represent "reality in its revolutionary development"⁵, proclaimed by Maksim Gor'kii at the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, opened, perhaps unexpectedly for itself, a textual space for utopian fantasies by constructing an implicitly anti-mimetic and teleological representational modality.

Interestingly, the ideological collapse of the 1991 did not bring about an explosion of dystopian texts as a straightforward reaction to Soviet cheerful utopianism. 1990s saw *chernukha* instead: the genre where, in the words of Eliot Borenstein, everyone "lived unhappily ever after,"⁶ preoccupied with the country's gloomy, dreary present. Yet, in the 2000s, critics note, "there appeared, before our own eyes, a whole stream of literature, where the authorial imagination is focused on the immediate future of Russian society, primarily – the political aspects of this future."⁷ The reason for the

⁴ For a discussion of Socialist Realism's utopian nature, see the Introduction to Clark 1981; for a very thorough discussion of the aesthetic implications of Socialist realism's "methodology", see Part 1 of: Robin 1992.

⁵ For a discussion of the implications of this maxim for the realist method, see Brandon Taylor, "Socialist Realism: 'To depict reality in its revolutionary development'", in *Adventures in Realism*, Ed. Matthew Beaumont (Hoboken, NJ, Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 142-157.

⁶ Borenstein 2008, 7.

⁷ See Aleksandr Tchantsev, "Fabrika antiutopii: distopicheskii diskurs v rossiiskoi literature serediny 2000-kh", in *Novoie Literaturnoe Obozreniie*, 2007, No. 86. Online version, <<http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2007/86/>>, accessed Jun 10, 2009. "Буквально на наших глазах возник целый поток литературы, в которой областью авторского вымысла становится близкое будущее российского общества, преимущественно – политические аспекты этого будущего". Tchantsev cites Dmitry Bykov's *Evakuator* (2005), Sergei Dorenko's *2008* (2005), Ol'ga Slavnikova's *2017* (2006) and several other novels among texts that exhibit this "tendency". Tchantsev suggests that, while on the surface

“gap” in the post-Soviet attempts to imagine the future is that the representation of a more or less totalitarian society and setting in the future constitute the dystopian genre. However, in the 1990s, representations of a totalitarian society *in the future* could hardly be cautionary tales for post-Soviet Russian culture. Totalitarianism in the post-Soviet context was not of the future but of the past, associated with the Soviet state that ceased to exist in 1991.

Yet, the visions of the future were brewing in post-Soviet culture of the 1990s, hidden in the midst of the representations of the country’s tumultuous present. Viktor Pelevin’s 1999 novel *Generation P* makes an ironic prediction about the immediate future of Russia:

The first point that must be taken into consideration, is that the situation that exists at the present moment in Russia cannot continue for very long. In the very near future we must expect ... the collapse of the financial system and serious social upheavals, which will all inevitably end in the establishment of a military dictatorship. Regardless of its political and economic programme, the future dictatorship will attempt to exploit nationalistic slogans: the dominant state aesthetic will be the pseudo-Slavonic style. (This term is not used here in any negative judgmental sense: as distinct from the Slavonic style, which does not exist anywhere in the real world, the pseudo-Slavonic style represents a carefully structured paradigm).⁸

the texts in question preserve the dystopian mode of a cautionary tale and are “directed into the future”, they nevertheless deal with the

⁸ The English text is cited from Andrew Bromfield’s translation: Viktor Pelevin, *Babylon* (London, Faber and Faber, 2000), online version at <<http://lib.rin.ru/doc/i/26414p.html>>, accessed March 1, 2009. The Russian text is cited from Viktor Pelevin, *Pokoleniie P*, online version at <<http://pelevin.nov.ru/romans/pe-genp/>>, accessed March 1, 2009. “Необходимо в первую очередь учитывать... что ситуация, которая сложилась к настоящему моменту в России, долго существовать не может. В ближайшем будущем

Pelevin's protagonist, Tatarskii, proposes that the ideology that is supposed to replace the current ideological disarray of the 1990s will support itself on the semiotic system that it itself will consciously construct, the "pseudo-Slavonic style" (*"lozhnoslavianskii stil'"*). As we have seen in Chapter 2, Tatarskii was correct – in the late 1990s, the ornamentalized national past, the foundation of the emergent nationalist ideology, emerged from the pseudo-folkloric aesthetics of the *lubok* that anchored the post-Soviet reality in the illusory legibility of the Russian pseudo-folklore.

Tatarskii makes it a point to not use the term as any sort of value judgment: it is precisely because he makes this a point that the attribute "*lozhnyi*" (fake) stands out. While Tatarskii could have possibly used a much more neutral term "pseudo," *psevdoslavianskii* (which Andrew Bromfield's translation does), he uses the negatively connoted "*lozhno*." It is this "wickedness" of the simulacrum that is picked up by the post-Soviet fantasies of the future that use this artificial cultural repository in constructing their dystopian milieus.

The dystopias that will be examined in this chapter know very well that the symbolic system associated with the Russian national past (which they utilize for constructing the future) does not quite "work," yet they still enjoy using it. The source of this enjoyment is the possibility of semiosis, meaning-production, at the core of this symbolic system. The effortless production of meaning was, as we have seen, one of the losses post-Soviet culture experienced in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union.

следует ожидать ... финансового краха и серьезных социальных потрясений, что неизбежно закончится установлением военной диктатуры. Вне зависимости от своей политической и экономической программы будущая диктатура попытается обратиться к националистическим лозунгам; господствующей государственной эстетикой станет ложнославянский стиль. (Этот термин употребляется нами не в негативно-оценочном смысле. В отличие от славянского стиля, которого не существует в природе, ложнославянский стиль является разработанной и четкой парадигмой)".

Pelevin's cautionary episode elucidates the fetishistic, and nostalgic, longing for the possibility of semiosis that the simulacra of the national past provide. Post-Soviet visions of the future dwell on these simulacra of the past because they seek to rediscover the country's future that was, too, lost with the end of Socialism. It is not surprising, then, that post-Soviet dystopias turn to the past, the time when the future was still possible, to rediscover the utopia within the post-Soviet pessimistic vision of national history.

Viktor Pelevin's *Bulldozer Driver's Day*: A Parallel Reality

An early post-Soviet text that attempts a dystopian representation of society launches a trend in post-Soviet dystopias that deal with post-apocalyptic ahistoricity and irrationality of existence. The 1991 novella by Viktor Pelevin, who was then yet to emerge as the major figure of the Russian brand of postmodernism, is titled *Bulldozer Driver's Day*. The novella portrays a day in the life of Ivan, a factory worker, who wakes up one morning and realizes he has forgotten everything that is really important about his life. Together with Ivan, the reader rediscovers his world, a bleak urban milieu evocative of the *chernukha* genre that on many levels is a hyperbole of a Soviet state. We learn that Ivan works at a secret factory that produces weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) but officially is known to produce plush toys. It is at this factory that Ivan was hit on the head with an A-bomb stabilizer, whereby his amnesia is conveniently attributed to a head trauma. We discover that everyone in the city is working at a WMD factory, of which there are several; that everyone drinks; and that many people of the city are mutants because of nuclear radiation. The city is extremely isolated and has been so since the apocalyptic event, the Revolution. We learn that the three revolutionary leaders,

caricatures of the Soviet trinity of Marx-Engels-Lenin, prohibited entering and exiting the city in their first decree.

The milieu Pelevin describes *is* a satire of the Soviet state, with the easily recognizable proliferation of slogans, scarcity of consumer goods and the familiar archenemies who are encouraged, in a drunken conversation, to “[jerk off] in their skyscrapers.”⁹ However, this is not just a satire of the Soviet material culture; it is also the satire of the Soviet temporality of the eternal present discussed in Chapter 2. Here, a parallel is drawn between this narrative temporality, and the post-apocalyptic “after”: Ivan’s head trauma and his amnesia affect the subjective third-person narration in a peculiar way. Ivan’s constant struggle to remember anything about his former self produces narrative stops during which Ivan muses on his feelings. As Ivan and his friends aimlessly wander the city, the narrative unfolds with no sense of progression. The effect is emphasized when the reader learns about the extreme predictability of existence in the city: in one episode, it is revealed that everyone in the city knows the exact time of the day when vodka shortages are to begin in the city’s stores. In the post-apocalyptic milieu, in the raw “after history,” historical time does not move forward.

The rest of the story follows Ivan becoming more and more dissatisfied with his life as he learns more about it; he understands eventually that his feelings did not betray him – he remembers, through a complex phonetic association, that he is, in fact, a foreign spy. The details of his mission are unclear, and the story ends with him walking towards a

⁹ The English text is cited from Viktor Pelevin, “Bulldozer Driver’s Day”, in Viktor Pelevin, *A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York, New Directions, 1998), 126-158, 130. As mentioned below, expletives in the text are modeled on Soviet ideological clichés “Ну что, вымпелюги майские, сжавали в своих небоскребах?” The expletive here is formed by adding a derogatory suffix to the root for *vympel*, “pennant”, a common Soviet symbol of labor achievement and/or winning a productivity competition displayed at the factories. The Russian text is quoted from: Viktor Pelevin, *Den’ Buldozerista*, online version at <<http://pelevin.nov.ru/pov/pe-buld/1.html>>, accessed January 30, 2009.

railway station. While the reader is not sure whether Ivan will ever leave the city, there is still some hope that he would be able to, because he finally knows who he is.

The story bears most of the marks of a classic dystopian text, featuring a society with an unmistakable totalitarian feel. Furthermore, the story concentrates on the everyday practices that are, to the reader, monstrously distorted; yet the people inhabiting the society are oblivious to these distortions. Moreover, the story provides a sharp political and cultural commentary on Soviet society. However, the text lacks one of the most important explicit markers of a classic dystopian text, that is, any reference to it being set in the future. Therefore, the story does not explicitly create a “safe place” from which it can provide a social critique of the society contemporary to itself. Instead, having been written during the last years of the *perestroika*, the story critiques what at the time of its creation is still supposed to be a utopian present, or, rather, what is rapidly becoming a “dystopian past.”¹⁰

Pelevin’s dystopian subjects inhabit a peculiar, ahistorical temporality, which, paradoxically, becomes that “safe place” from which the story can provide its social critique. Such temporality owes its existence to Socialist Realism. Dealing with “reality in its revolutionary development,” Socialist Realist texts adopted an implicitly futuristic modality of representation in their utopian conceptualization of reality.

Interestingly, on the level of narratives, Socialist Realism did not produce any futuristic tales where Communism has already come, with the exception of Socialist

¹⁰ The unexpectedly optimistic outcome of the plot seems to attest to this: by examining the hopelessness of the Soviet existence and providing a way out of it, the story is representative of the general feeling of hopefulness that was associated with relative cultural and economic openness of the late-Soviet society during *perestroika*. Furthermore, the plot expresses a common *perestroika* sentiment that associates the West with hopes for democracy and freedom, sociopolitical notions that, at least among Russian liberals, were meant to undo the “totalitarian” legacy of the Soviet state.

science fiction.¹¹ Instead, this utopian impulse produced a perhaps unanticipated effect on the nature of narrative temporality in Socialist Realist texts that, in Katerina Clark's words, are set in the mythic Great Time.¹² Clark explains that the messianic societies like the Soviet Union under Stalin locate their Great Time, a source of transcendent reality, in the past and the future. In Socialist Realism, the Great Time is the reality that "should be," that is, the "Communist reality." Importantly, this reality is located "after" the advent of Communism on the historical timeline, that is, after the ultimate point in the Marxist vision of the historical process. Thus, the narrative temporality of the Socialist Realist texts halts historical time.¹³ Socialist Realist novels nearly uniformly produce the impression of being set in the never-ending present (at times, paradoxically, like Valentin Kataev's *Time, Forward* (1932) where one day does not seem to end); however, this never-ending present is exactly what the post-historic Communist future should theoretically feel like.

So, the ahistoric narrative temporality of Pelevin's story, with no real sense of progression, is, however satiric its incarnation, a temporality common to Socialist Realist texts. Pelevin, then, satirizes and thus subverts one of Socialist Realism's own methods, working against the non-progression of historical time by emphasizing its effect on the characters. In other words, the utopian Communist society turns in the text into a dystopian one not only because of the shift in cultural attitude towards social mechanisms of the Socialist state during the *perestroika*. There seems to be another shift underway in the late-Soviet culture: the utopian eternal present of Socialist Realism becomes a dystopian temporality as the positive (utopian) value attached to it is reversed. The

¹¹ For more on Socialist science fiction and its alignment with Socialist realist principles, see the Chapter 4.

¹² Clark 39-40.

¹³ Katerina Clark considers this utopian temporality in: Clark 1981, 36.

utopian stability of the Soviet state becomes a stability of absence in Pelevin's story: it is the absence of vodka in the stores that firmly structures the certainty with which the city's inhabitants face the next day.

How exactly does Pelevin's text manage to create a satire of the eternal present? The appeal of the past as a cultural repository for conceptualizing the future lies not only in the post-Soviet inversion of historical temporality as theorized by Mikhail Epstein. This appeal also comes from the extrapolation that joins the past as an historical category yet to be defined, to the genres associated with this past, and the peculiar way of semiosis that these genres provide. While in Socialist Realism the underlying ideology implicitly ensured that the narrative temporality is devoid of flow of (historical) time, Pelevin's text turns to folklore. The folkloric treatment of historical time is, paradoxically, very similar to that of Socialist Realism; while Socialist Realism, to an extent, denies history, folklore is yet unaware of it.

A very important feature of Pelevin's dystopian milieu is that it is permeated with oral culture with unmistakable roots in Russian folklore. Thus, the protagonist's best friend, Valerka, aspires to achieve the rank of "People's Nightingale." The rank is a satire of various Soviet awards, and in this case, the award reflects the person's ability to curse poetically.¹⁴ In Pelevin's satirized Soviet society, "cursing" means faithfully recreating the party slogans and clichés of Communist discourse, adding derogative suffixes. The Soviet clichés are then compiled into a flow of nearly meaningless yet exceptionally

¹⁴ This ability, too, is a satire of the value that Russian culture places on one of the performative aspects of the traditionally conceived masculinity, for which the creative use of Russian obscene language, the *mat*, is arguably elevated to the level of art. For a discussion of Russian *mat* in conjunction with masculinity, see Vadim Mikhailin, "[Russian Army Mat as a Code System Controlling Behaviour in the Russian army](http://www.pipss.org/index93.html)". *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 2004 (1), <<http://www.pipss.org/index93.html>> Accessed Jun 10, 2009.

emotional speech, teeming with phrases like “five Stakhanovs [Soviet labor hero. – DK] up your exchange of experience” and “shove the weak link up your Rot-Front and a superstructure in behind.”¹⁵

Additionally, the party secretary in *Bulldozer Driver’s Day* is able to “tune in his mind for the faultless exposition of the party line,”¹⁶ thus finding common ground with the workers by appealing to the people’s folk “roots.” The party secretary adopts a specific “mode,” achieved by series of breathing exercises, upon which he is able to speak in what sounds like a vaguely comprehensible Slavic dialect, full of parallel constructions, repetitions and mildly offensive references to mysterious entities. The meaningless words combine,¹⁷ the in party secretary’s speech, into phrases that due to their repetitive syntax sound like incantations.

The reasons why the performativity associated with oral genres permeates Pelevin’s satire of a Soviet utopia can be found in the Alexei Yurchak’s¹⁸ discussion of late-Soviet loss of the language’s constative dimension, i.e. the ability of signifiers to be unquestionably and “naturally” attached to their signifieds. This radical break between the signifier and the signified, a function of the endless repetition of the official discourse that had little to no relation to experiential reality, in the end made sustaining the ideological illusion impossible.

What is left of a language that is, according to Yurchak, stripped of its constative element? If this is, indeed, pure performance, then a turn to genres that have the

¹⁵ Pelevin 1998, 140.

¹⁶ Pelevin 1998, 143.

¹⁷ Through prefixation and suffixation.

¹⁸ See Yurchak 2006, 21-26.

performative element of language at their core, namely, to folklore, becomes less surprising.

Folklore's expressive nature, tied to the beliefs in the power of language that assigns magic properties to words, plays into the project of "dystopianizing" the eternal present of the Soviet history. Russian folklore is a vast body of texts that, as we will see, will continue to serve, for the post-Soviet dystopia, as a symbolic and paradigmatic source of the post-apocalyptic temporality. Folkloric time, pre-national and pre-historical, is "timeless" time, and thus is metonymically related to both the Soviet "national time" of the never-ending present, and to its direct heir, the post-Soviet suspended temporality of Epstein's "after the future."

Furthermore, the peculiarities of language in folklore, as it seems, answer the concerns that late-Soviet and early post-Soviet culture experiences in relation to the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In a perverse twist on the Russian logocentric paradigm of culture, post-Soviet dystopia picks up on one of folklore's most salient features,¹⁹ namely, the spoken word being assigned magical properties. The language of folklore exerts control over the world not by the means characteristic of modernity, i.e., by active interpretation of meaning (a failed attempt in the case of compromised Soviet discourse, as Yurchak showed), but instead by an extension of Althusserian interpellation, where the signifier becomes equivalent to its signified.

¹⁹ Bronislaw Malinowski, for example, in his *Coral Gardens*, discusses magical language's pragmatic aspects; when words equal acts, Malinowski argues, the outcome is far from being just imaginary. Instead, magical formulae, like Sorokin's "incantation" against the grim future happening, are meant to instill individuals with hope, make them feel they are actively shaping their futures and are, in a way, in control of their fate, all of which are relevant social and cultural concerns in the post-Soviet context. For Malinowski's pragmatic theory of magical language, see Bronislaw Malinowski, *Collected Works, Vol. VIII: Coral Gardens and their Magic* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), esp. 50-54.

Magical thinking, as theorized by structuralist anthropology,²⁰ posits symbols as complete equivalents of their referents. It is via this perverse reconnection, paradoxically, that the equally perverse gap between the signifier and the signified that the Soviet authoritative discourse produced can be closed. The return to folklore (folklorism), then, can be deemed a defense mechanism, however dysfunctional and problematic, against the late-Soviet disintegration of the definitive system of signification, i.e., the Soviet master narrative.

Tatiana Tolstaia's *The Slynx*: The Future of Nostalgia.

An ahistoric temporality with no sense of progression, similar to the one Pelevin associates with the Soviet eternal present in *Bulldozer Driver's Day*, operates in Tatiana Tolstaia's 2001 novel, *The Slynx* (*Kys*). The novel was written over a period of more than ten years, and thus arguably exhibits the late-Soviet sentiment characteristic of *perestroika* that we have seen shaping Pelevin's 1991 novella. The novel deconstructs the very notion of functional history, focusing on creating the feel of a post-apocalyptic temporality. In the novel, the post-historic (and post-apocalyptic), never-ending present becomes the only possible temporality after the movement of history has stopped.

The Slynx is a variation on the philosophical novel about the fate of Russia: thus its obvious references to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*; nearly direct quotations from Nikolai Gogol's *The Dead Souls* ("And they come closer and closer and the clatter goes louder ... There's heat and whistles ... and clods of mud fly up from the runners...").

²⁰ For the theories of magical language, see Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages", supplement to C K Ogden and I A Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London, 1923), and M. Mauss, *A general theory of magic*, trans. R. Brain (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1972)

and then they're gone. ... [I]n the distance the dull thud of felt boots dies down;")²¹ and, most prominently, its play with the simulacrum of "the sun of Russian literature," Aleksandr Pushkin who, expectedly, comes to symbolize in the dystopian milieu of the novel that which does not exist anymore, namely, culture.²² However, *The Slynx* subverts the traditional messianic content of the myth of "the fate of Russia," because unlike Nikolai Chernyshevskii's bright 19th-century fantasies of a utopian Socialist future that, in his *What Is To Be Done?*, are still just the protagonist's dreams, in *The Slynx* the future has arrived and is here to stay.

Rather than attempting a conventionally futuristic dystopian representation of the fate of Russia (either by introducing "progressive" ideas or a new technology gone wrong), *The Slynx* proposes the future of Russia to be the easily recognizable intellectual construct of its historic past, with feudalistic social structures and pagan cosmology. The national space that the novel creates is a complex simulacrum of "Russia" as mediated through the constructs of history and culture.

This Russia of the future in the novel is a hybrid construct: it is recognizable as Russia (as Tolstaia's readers know it) because of its overwhelming bureaucracy, bleak everyday life and the strict control that the unchallenged state executes over its subjects. As I have theorized earlier, post-Soviet texts struggle with the temporal setting of a dystopia (Pelevin's text did not offer any explicit indicator of being set in the future); in *The Slynx*, the bureaucracy and the bleakness of everyday life, again, refer to the legacy

²¹ The English text is cited from: Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, trans. Jamey Gambrell. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003, 36. Further quotations refer to this edition. The Russian text is cited from Tatiana Tolstaia, *Кыс'* (online version), <<http://www.lib.ru/PROZA/TOLSTAYA/kys.txt>> (accessed February 15, 2009): "А они все ближе, а топот все громче, - вот, накатило! Жар, и свист, и хрипло дышит шестерка, и комыя грязи из-под полозьев... и пронеслись. Тишина. Только вдали затихает тупая дробь валенок").

²² For more on Pushkin's role in *The Slynx* see Chapter 1.

of the Soviet past which becomes a model for the future. Thus, a circular version of history is created, akin to Epstein's "temporal loop" of Russian history. The Soviet past, in the novel, returns to haunt the people of the future, channeling the folkloric Russia which, at a first glance, shapes this future exclusively. This type of "layered past" is at work even in those late-Soviet and post-Soviet dystopian texts which do not make heavy use of the "pseudo-Slavonic aesthetics" in creating their simulacra of dystopian national space: in Vladimir Voinovich's *Moscow 2042* (1986), the dystopian Russia of the future is shaped by an explicitly proclaimed blend of Stalinism and feudalist Orthodoxy.

The Slynx, too, exhibits the simultaneous tension and similarity between the parodic Soviet state and the pseudo-Slavonic folkloric space it occupies. Far from being an explicit political satire, however, the novel is preoccupied with the exploration of the post-apocalyptic milieu on a very intimate level, as it delves into the consciousness of the post-apocalyptic subject.

The novel is set in an ahistoric space that is, technically, the Russia of the future. This Russia barely exists as a state, being just another "consequence" of the event that structures this space: the Apocalypse (presumably, an atomic "Blast") that paradoxically catalyzes the mutation of not only the human subjects inhabiting the space, but also of the linear progression of time. The Blast, aside from being an obvious reference to the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 and a conventional Cold War metaphor for the Apocalypse, turns out to have more "consequences" than just the genetic mutations of the characters, as it can provisionally be read as a metaphor for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Multiple references to the post-Soviet nostalgia for the material cultures of Socialism

point to the fact that the post-apocalyptic society of *The Slynx* is at least partly a nostalgic society, mourning that which has been lost.

While the nostalgia of the novel's characters is, in a way, conventional, directed towards the lost system of signification and material culture associated with the past, the novel itself is nostalgic in a different way. Svetlana Boym discusses one of the mechanisms of nostalgia, namely, its ability to create an identifiable place for itself by solidification and mythologization of the national space.²³ *The Slynx* undertakes a similar conceptual operation in its own textual space, through positing Russia as an imaginary place which is structured by a signifying system associated with pre-modern period in Russian history.

The pre-modern, folkloric, magical milieu where the novel is set is an ironic pastiche of Russian cultural heritage. Given this fact, the issue of whether or not *The Slynx*'s turn to the past is a nostalgic move is an important one. In the novel, the past itself is a highly problematic category: though Russian culture of the future turns out to be modeled (again) on the recognizable period of the national past (or, rather, on its simulacrum), the *experiential* past, so to say, is not accessible to many of the inhabitants of Tolstaia's dystopian society. The third-person subjective narration belongs to the young, neurotic, naïve and exceptionally honest Benedikt, a protagonist who has no memory of life before the Blast; thus, for him, the past hardly bears any significance. Other social groups in the novel, discussed below, do have the memories but are stripped of narrative power, which is why the novel problematizes nostalgia via diversifying the levels of access to memories.

²³See Boym 1995, esp. 76-80.

The nostalgia in *The Slynx*, so to say, initially has no real agency, because the reader is compelled to follow the protagonist as Benedikt unconsciously attempts to shed his primitivized, non-nostalgic self by rediscovering the lost culture, symbolized by the books that are banned in the post-apocalyptic Russia of the future. Benedikt's quest for reading, then, exposes the inner workings of nostalgia, demonstrating that he longs for that of which he hardly has conscious memory and for what he can hardly call his own. Indeed, Benedikt's love for books turns out to be a perverse love, because when he gains access to his father-in-law's private library, it turns out that whether to read Lermontov or agricultural manuals makes no difference for Benedikt: he reads for the process, not for the ideas, as he should have been had the novel been more of a conventional philosophical *Bildungsroman*.

Yet, even as the novel exposes the conceptual pitfall of nostalgia by questioning the protagonist's right to be nostalgic, it still clings to nostalgic sentiment. This sentiment appears in the novel because of the inversion of historical linearity that it performs in creating the post-apocalyptic milieu, and consequently, because of the "identification split" that the reader has to undergo to be able to read the novel as dystopian. The post-Soviet reader's allegiance to the characters in the novel is split between the protagonist, whose very intimate perspective the third-person subjective narration ensures, and another class of the inhabitants of world of *The Slynx*, with whom this reader shares not only the memories of the past, but also an ability to conceptualize history.

The post-apocalyptic society in which *The Slynx* is set is exceptionally diverse. This diversity is on the surface structured along the susceptibility to genetic mutation and/or, metaphorically, along the lines of class; on a deeper level it turns out to be more

determined by access to the memory of the past than by anything else. Thus, the Oldeners (*Byvshiie*) have no physical “consequences” (mutations), except for their seeming ability to live forever and become, in this eternal existence, the keepers of the “spiritual heritage” that is of interest only to them. The mutants (*pererozhdentsy*) have mutated after the Blast; many of them keep the memories of the life before the Blast, but these memories are limited to the clichéd recollections of worldly possessions, i.e., for them nostalgia becomes precisely the cultural fetishism that Boym theorizes to be a major post-Soviet nostalgic mechanism. Finally, *golubchiki*, the common folk, constitute the majority of the population, and the narrator is one of them. They have no conscious memory of the life before the Blast.²⁴

The diversity of the population in the world of *The Slynx* ensures the parallel existence of the two discourses, one knowledgeable of the inversion of the linearity and another oblivious to it. While *Byvshiie*, the Oldeners, are the carriers of the former, the narratorial power (to the extent that the third person narration allows for it) is given to the carrier of the latter. Benedikt measures time through a subjective distinction between childhood and adulthood, and up to a certain point his own life’s milestones are the death of his mother, his “nervous breakdowns” and his marriage. While the *Byvshiie* struggle with the past and the future having exchanged places, which is quite possible to conceive of on the conceptual level, but creates only aporias being put into words (“It will come, everything will come [*Budet, vsio budet*]!”). The most important thing is to preserve our

²⁴ Interestingly enough, nobody seems to have an actual memory of the Blast itself, which proves our initial assumption of the Blast being the moment of trauma.

spiritual heritage!”²⁵, Benedikt is in some ways luckier, as his subjective time is folkloric in a sense that it is not organized into historical temporal categories.

The reader, then, is forced to look at the dystopian Russia through the eyes of Benedikt the narrator, whose ahistoric and atemporal position shapes the perception of the post-historic temporality of the novel. The reader is invited to experience this temporality on a very intimate emotional level through identification with the narrator. On the other hand the identification on the intellectual level happens not with Benedikt, but with the Oldeners, who are easily recognizable as Russian intellectuals because of the discursive patterns they employ and because of the constant attention they pay to the issues of culture. So, together with the Oldeners, the reader feels the effect of a “temporal loop” that history has made in the world of *The Slynx*.

Benedikt’s narratorial power, however, ensures that the temporality that he unquestionably inhabits diminishes the effect of the “temporal loop” of which the Oldeners are aware. The reader, therefore, is nearly lured on the emotional level into sharing the timeless temporality with the protagonist/narrator. Thus, instead of being presented with the conceptual, highly abstract and intellectualized “after-history” (as it emerges in post-Soviet theorizations of Epstein and Dragan Kujundžić²⁶), Tolstaia’s Russian reader gets the “after-history” in the raw, with little to no intellectualization. The narrator does not knowingly or consciously contribute to the readers’ discovery of the fact that “history” used to exist in Tolstaia’s dystopian milieu.

²⁵ Tolstaya 111. “Будет, все будет! Главное же - сберечь духовное наследие!”

²⁶ Consider the level of abstraction in Kujundžić’s musing in his *"After": Russian Post-Colonial Identity*: “Russia is after history in a sense that it is “outside history, before history occurred, in the realm where the temporality of the World History has not even happened: in the realm of Messianic promise that will alone hurl Russia towards the historical, its full teleological fulfillment, ‘after’ it and beyond”. (See Dragan Kujundžić, Dragan. “After: Russian Post-Colonial Identity”. MLN, Vol. 115, # 5, Comparative Literature Issue. (Dec., 2000), 892-908, 892).

The genuine “after” that Benedikt’s perspective provides turns out to have limited and distorted connections to the “before” with which the Oldeners are preoccupied. While the two have to be connected on some level (the existence of one is determined by the presence of another), the “after” that Benedikt represents is simultaneously dependent on the “before” and voiding it, denying its significance, having never known the “before.” Paradoxically, given the amount of attention the text pays to the views of the Oldeners, and thus to the “before,” the “after” seems to be the temporality in which the text is really interested: by making the character who has no memory of the pre-Apocalypse narrate the text, it is as if the novel wants to make sure that the reader forgets the “before.” And to facilitate forgetting, it employs the mind-numbing narrative techniques of retardation and parallel constructions, not uncommon in the folkloric large form:

Aye, aye, aye, but we poor small folk have to stand on our porches at night, inhaling the freezing darkness, exhaling a slightly warmer darkness. We stomp our feet, turn our faces to the distant heavenly Spindle, listen to tears tinkling like frozen peas, rolling into the thickets of our beards, we listen to the silence of the black izbas [peasant huts. – DK] on black foothills, the creak of high trees, to the whine of the blizzard, which brings in gusts – barely audible, but still clear – of a distant, pitiful, hungry northern wail.²⁷

²⁷ Tolstaya 60. “Ох-ти, охтенки, а нам, малым да сирым, в ночи на крыльце стоять, вдыхать морозную тьму, выдыхать тьму чуть теплую, переступать с ноги на ногу, задирать личико к далекому небесному Веретену, слушать, как слезы мороженым горошком шуршат, скатываются в заросли бороды, слушать, как молчат черные избы на черных пригорках, как поскрипывают высокие деревья, как ноет метельный ветер, как доносит порывами, - чуть слышно, но явственно, - далекий, жалобный, северный голодный вой”.

What goes on in this paragraph is hardly distinguishable behind the conglomerations of parallel constructions, a traumatic repetition where the meaning is lost in the fissures between the words and the text fails to be identified as anything but a repetition of constructed “Russianness” by the virtue of its recognizable folkloric roots.

So, in *The Slynx*, too, we see “pseudo-Slavonic” aesthetics and ritualistic repetition put to use for creating the dystopian milieu. To see how these fit into the novel’s reconceptualization of historical temporality, we will need to look at the role that language plays in Tolstaia’s dystopian milieu and what transformations the very notion of language undergoes therein.

Nearly every scholar of Tolstaia has noted *The Slynx*’s focus on logocentrism as one of the essential features of the Russian culture.²⁸ The ways the novel approaches Russian logocentrism (and deconstructs it) elucidates why “pseudo-Slavonic aesthetics” and genres associated with it become such a productive cultural repository for the post-Soviet dystopia; they provide conceptual mechanisms that reflect on the shift in conceiving historical temporality in the post-Soviet context.

Tolstaia’s Russia of the future is surprisingly logocentric, but the dystopian premise of the novel ensures that this logocentrism is a pastiche of itself. Mikhail Epstein argues that postmodernism in Russia is about “a parodic unmasking of centuries of logocentrism in Russian culture, of captivity to the word and the ideological principle.”²⁹ “The captivity to the word” that the world of *The Slynx* manifests speaks to Epstein’s

²⁸ A succinct characteristic of Tolstaia’s love-hate relationship with logocentrism in *The Slynx* is given in Mark Lipovetskii, “PMS (Post-Modernism Segodnia)”, in *Znamya*, 2002, No. 5. Online version at <<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2002/5/lipov.html>>, accessed February 12, 2009.

²⁹ Epstein 1995, 328.

observation very well. Nearly every *golubchik* is an avid reader, even if Brandis' (sic) trigonometric charts are among their favorites.³⁰

However compromised logocentrism thus might be in *The Slynx*, it is not denied its power either over the characters or over the text itself. *The Slynx* is structured around the Old Russian alphabet, as reflected in the chapter titles, which makes it possible to read it as a *Bildungsroman* that narrates the story of the acquisition of knowledge.³¹

Yet, Russian logocentrism in the novel is not without its dangers: on the level of the plot, persecution awaits those who possess the "old-print" (i.e., pre-Blast) books. Furthermore, Benedikt's developing passion for reading does not bring him much besides moral anguish, as he ends up killing for reading, as if reading were a narcotic. The book in the world of *The Slynx* is indeed comparable to a mind-altering substance, as it acquires magical qualities and is personified:

You, Book! You are the only one who won't deceive, won't attack, won't abandon! You're quiet – but you laugh, shout and sing; you're obedient – but you amaze, tease and entice; ... Nothing but a handful of letters, that's all, but if you feel like it, you can turn heads, confuse, spin, cloud, make tears spring to the eyes, take away the breath... Sometimes a kind of *wordless* feeling tosses and turns in the chest, pounds its fists on the wall... I'm suffocating! Let me out!... What words can you dress it in? *We don't have any words, we don't know! Just like wild animals, or a blindie bird, or a mermaid – no words, just a bellowing.*

³⁰ Interestingly, the reading preferences of the Russians of the future have an unmistakable postmodern quality, as the texts of all sorts have equal value (and, by the same token, no value at all).

³¹ This reading is reinforced by the name of the main character, alluding to Spinoza, and by his heritage (his mother is an *antelegent*, a bastardized spelling of *intelligent*, an intellectual).

[italics mine. – DK] But you open a book – and there they are, fabulous, flying words.³²

The novel's problematic treatment of logocentrism, however, is best seen in the way it constructs post-apocalyptic reality. As per genre convention, the fantasies that the dystopian fiction creates require new language to describe the new social and cultural notions. In the world of *The Slynx*, a range of neologisms is introduced to name the mutated flora and fauna (*chervyr'* the maggot, *vertizubka* the fish, *slepovran* the blind raven, *bliadunitsa* the pigeon, etc.). Yet, due to the fact that part of the population has access to the memories of life before the Blast, they possess the pre-Blast vocabulary that denotes both abstract notions and items of everyday material culture, which contributes to the effect of the “temporal loop” in the novel. Thus, a “regular” word like ‘miasorubka’ (meat grinder) is a complete neologism for Benedikt and the rest of the *golubchiks*, yet for the Oldeners it is a nostalgic notion.

However, the system of designation in the novel is somewhat dysfunctional, which is an unexpected move for dystopian fiction that should theoretically strive to make its constructed world as “believable” (and thus as coherent) as possible. This, too, is the result of the diversity in Tolstaia's universe. At least for the Oldeners (and thus for the reader, whose intellectual and/or conceptual allegiance to this group was discussed above), the language in the novel is seriously discredited in its ability to account for changed reality.

³²Tolstaya 189. “Ты, Книга! Ты одна не обманешь, не ударишь, не обидишь, не покинешь! Тихая,— а смеешься, кричишь, поешь; покорная,— изумляешь, дразнишь, заманиваешь; малая — а в тебе народы без числа; пригоршня буковок, только-то, а захочешь — вскружишь голову ... дыхание захолонет, вся-то душа как полотно на ветру взволнуется...! А то чувство какое бессловесное в груди ворочается, стучит кулаками в двери...: задыхаюся! выпусти!— а как его, голое-то, шершавое, выпустишь? какими словами оденешь? Нет у нас слов, не знаем! *Как все равно у зверя дикого, али у слеповрана, али русалки,— нет слов, мык один* (italics mine. - DK)! А книгу раскроешь, — и там они, слова, дивные, летучие”.

To illustrate the point, consider the following exchange between the two Oldeners who are unable to find a proper designation for one of the Degenerators, the mutants:

But he's not human! Humans don't have felt boots on their hands! – You have to look at it more broadly! ... We won't argue about definitions... Who are you and I...? Bipedes without feathers, with articulate speech... Let me out, I'll go and invite him... What is his name?³³

The problem with the definitions that the Oldeners encounter and are too eager to dismiss is at the core of the text's concerns about what happens to language in the aftermath of the destruction of culture. As the conventional dichotomy of human/non-human fails in a world inhabited by a wide range of mutants, so do conventional linguistic designations. The Oldeners then have to turn to the performative aspects of the identities of the subjects they seek to classify: they have to consider whether the Degenerators wear felt boots on their hands, and, beyond the quotation above, whether they are fine with their fate to serve in the place of the extinct horse to transport those who are considered “people”). The problem here is that the linguistic milieu in which the characters of *The Slynx* function allows for a coexistence of two irreconcilable discourses: one subscribing to the old, conventional dichotomy between human and animal, and another, attempting to account for the reality that is already non-dichotomic (hence the terms, the Oldeners, the Degenerators and the *golubchiks*). *The Slynx*, then, occupies an ambivalent position towards logocentrism: on the level of the plot, it exposes the mutation of the (supposedly) devalued and misinterpreted concept, while on the level of the text's own structure it supports the value of logocentrism.

³³Tolstaya 199. “Дак он и не человек! У человека валенок на руках нету! - Шире надо смотреть! И без него народ неполный! — назидал Лев Львович. - Не будем спорить о дефинициях...— Мы-то с вами кто... Двухное без перьев, речь членораздельная...”

There seems to be two temporalities simultaneously operating within the world of *The Slynx*. The first is the subjective time of the characters, with a seemingly conventional position of past, present and future, which ensures the functioning of the novel's subset genre, that of *Bildungsroman*. The second temporality is the time of national history, paradoxically inverted as the Russia of the future becomes the Russia of the past. In Epstein's words, historical temporality is thus "turned inside out."³⁴ One of the characters, as if illustrating Epstein's theory, laments: "Why, ... why is it that everything keeps mutating, everything? People, well, all right, but the language, concept, meaning! Huh? Russia! Everything gets twisted up in knots [*vsyo vyvernuto*]."³⁵

Moreover, the individual time of the characters is not nearly as "normal" as it might initially seem. Though the reader is able to identify what happens to the characters first and what happens next, the category of historic time is not operational in the folkloric realm, and thus the modern distinctions of past, present and future do not hold; the protagonist is therefore stuck outside of historic time as known to the readers. This problematizes the reader's own temporal position, and thus, along with adding to the dystopian feel of the novel by making the text's temporality exceptionally alien, simultaneously compromises the genre convention by failing to define the reader's position in relation to the temporal location of the dystopian society.

Epstein suggests that "culture is an anti-time machine built into history."³⁶ Indeed, the end of history in *The Slynx* is what compromises the perceived historical linearity of culture by inverting it:

³⁴ Epstein 1995: xi.

³⁵ Tolstaya 196. "Отчего бы это, — says Nikita Ivanich, the protagonist's mentor, — отчего это у нас все мутирует, ну все! Ладно люди, но язык, понятия, смысл! А? Россия! Все вывернуто!").

³⁶ Epstein 1995: xiii.

Moreover, friends, material culture is being restored hour by hour. The wheel has been reinvented, the yoke is returning to use, and the solar clock as well! We will soon learn to fire pottery! Isn't that correct, friends? The time of the meat grinder will come. Though at present it may seem as mysterious as the secrets of the pyramids... as incomprehensible... as the canals of the planet Mars – the hour will come, friends, when it will start working!³⁷

Marina Balina's "absolute pause... and the void (i.e., anti-time)"³⁸ discussed in the Introduction, the halt to which the late-Soviet texts brought the time of Socialism, is the pause to which historical time has come in *The Slynx*: both Benedikt and his pre-modern, folkloric space are suspended in time. As a traumatic and nostalgic text, *The Slynx* creates a pre-modern, ahistorical temporality which provides yet another (and elegant) way to manipulate the "absolute time" of the Soviet symbolic order, by attaching the absolute quality lost by the Soviet narrative to the timeless, folkloric time of the text.

By moving her characters out of historical time, then, Tolstaia suggests a way out of the paradox of inverted historical linearity by establishing a pause in the flow of history, even as this pause is relegated into the future and is otherwise problematic on many levels. The folkloric timeless temporality of *The Slynx* compulsively recreates the Soviet temporality of never-ending present in the textual space of the novel.

This textual space is constructed as a dystopia, and thus is "of course... about the present." Being such, it becomes a textual site where the confusing vectors of post-Soviet

³⁷ Tolstaya 121. "Материальная культура, друзья, ежечасно восстанавливается. Вновь изобретено колесо, возвращается коромысло, солнечные часы! Скоро научимся обжигать горшки! Верно, друзья? Придет черед и мясорубки. И пусть сейчас она так же загадочна, как тайна пирамид, - стоят ли они еще, мы не знаем, - так же непостижна уму, как каналы Марса, - но пробьет час, друзья, и она заработает!"

³⁸ As discussed in Balina, 2000, 60.

historical temporality come together, by providing a distinctly utopian possibility for the post-Soviet subject. To deal with the post-Soviet collapse of the organizing categories of history, the novel puts history on hold, allowing the unmoving time of the narrative to be spent reflecting on the lessons from the past, and on the methods to be used to navigate the post-collapse cultural milieu.

In *The Slynx*, such timeless, post-historic temporality is largely a “result” of the title “character,” the slynx,³⁹ as its existence, on the level of the plot, ensures the impossibility of ‘progress’ in a conventional sense: the slynx is the primary villain in the folk mythology that guides the post-apocalyptic society. It is the fear of the slynx that makes the *golubchiks* extremely cautious, close-minded and therefore insusceptible to the beauty of the symbol of progress, the meat grinder so celebrated by the Oldeners. Simultaneously, the integral role of the slynx for the formation of the protagonist’s subjectivity, as we will see, attests to the anxieties of identification (and a certain enjoyment derived from them) that the inhabitants of such temporality have to face.

Interestingly, the slynx not a “species” in the way all other mutant creatures of the text are, with the exception of *Ptitsa Paulin*, the slynx’s chief antagonist in Benedikt’s fantasies. Presumably, there exists only one slynx, which right away makes it possible to read it, through Derrida, as human, because the slynx cannot be reduced to a multitude.⁴⁰ At the initial encounter with the slynx, however, it is “obvious” that it is an animal, as the

³⁹ *Kys*’ (translated as ‘slynx’ from the Russian) is ostensibly a phonetic clipping of *koshka* (cat) and *rys*’ (lynx). The interpretation that builds a chain of phonetic associations between *kys*’ and *Rus*’ (Old Russian word for “Russia”) has been proposed in an ideological reading of the text. See Boris Paramonov, “Russkaia Istoriia Nakonets Opravdala Sebya v Literature”, *Vremya MN*, October 14, 2000 (online version at <<http://www.guelman.ru/slava/kis/paramonov.htm>>, accessed Jun 12, 2009).

⁴⁰ Derrida observes that humanity prefers its animals in the plural, as the single animal (the other) can be fixed as the Other, Other-as-Human, which threatens the constructed dichotomy. For Derrida’s discussion of the human/non-human dichotomy, see Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well’, or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”, E. Cadava et.al., eds., in *Who Comes After the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 96-119.

reader's perception by that point is conditioned, in the exposition, by a variety of flying hares and figs that glow in the dark. The slynx, against this dystopian background, seems to be just another item in the monster gallery.

Interestingly, *kys'* is both the creature's name and the only 'discourse' available to it, in the form of a sound it makes. The phonetic connotations of the word *kys'* may be interpreted as introducing the motive of temptation, deceit and obstruction.⁴¹

Notwithstanding the possibilities of interpreting the slynx's "name," the range of interpretations is too wide,⁴² which is why it can be argued that in the text *slynx* stands for that which cannot be named. This reading is supported by another "property" of the slynx: it is invisible. In the conceptual mapping of the folkloric space of the text, the slynx belongs to the North, to the night, to the lack of "civilization," to absence (invisibility).

As the narrative progresses, the slynx gets more and more detailed descriptions, as if acquiring a body while moving from the periphery of the narrative to its center. The image develops along the lines of primal fear, existential anguish, and anxiety of identification:

[You'll] start thinking... listening to ...the wail just outside the window, begging to be let in; something white, heavy, cold, unseen. You *suddenly imagine your izba far off and tiny, like you're looking down at it from a treetop* [italics mine. –

DK] ... The branches rock in the northern trees, and on the branches, swaying up

⁴¹ Russian *kis-kis* as a call for a cat; also, the lynx that blocks Dante's way in the beginning of *The Divine Comedy* comes to mind.

⁴² As the slynx ostensibly "stands" for the "message" of the novel, the critics tend to try unpacking the range of meanings its name contains: for an ideological reading, see, e.g., Paramonov 2000; for a more existential take on the novel, see V. Kuritsyn's review of *Kys'* in *Vremya MN* (2000): V. Kuritsyn, "Retsenziia na *Kys'* T. Tolstoi", *Vremya MN*, 2000, online version available at <http://www.guelman.ru/slava/kis/kur.htm>, accessed March 10, 2009.

and down, is the *invisible* Slynx... [it] presses its *invisible* ears against its flat *invisible* head, and it cries in a hungry cry, and reaches, reaches ... for the warm blood pounding in the people's necks: SSSLYYYNXXX! Fear touches your heart like a cold draft or a small paw, and you shudder... as if you don't know who or where you are (*slovno ty sam sebe tschuzhoi*). Who am I?⁴³

The slynx here functions as a nearly perfect gaze of the Other, as Benedikt for a split second is able to see through the slynx's eyes. This initial effect wanes and is forgotten in Benedikt's subsequent "spiritual encounters" with the slynx, as his anxieties are up to a certain point manifested by the feeling that "one has the slynx on one's back," literally "the slynx looks at you from behind", *kys' v spinu smotrit*). This paranoid sensation, for the time being at least, contains and conceals Benedikt's split subjectivity: Benedikt seems to have happily forgotten that he was already transformed into the object of the slynx's gaze and saw himself through its eyes just pages before.

The paradox of the slynx is that, as its body acquires more and more detailed description, it nevertheless remains invisible. This invisibility is not a physical property of the slynx's body; Benedikt's concession, "One can't see it [the slynx], one can't see it" (182) (*a videt'-to ee nel'zia, nel'zia videt'-to*) seems to be as much about the physical invisibility as it is about the prohibition to see. Moreover, it turns out that its body is at least partly anthropomorphic: it has a face instead of a muzzle and is able to grimace.

⁴³ Tolstaya 45. "[3]адумаешься, ... слушая, как шуршит под полом, как трещит в печи, как воет, подступает, жалуется за окном, просится в дом что-то белое, тяжелое, холодное, незримое; и *представится тебе вдруг твоя изба далекой и малой, словно с дерева смотришь* [*italics mine*. – DK], ... и качаются ветки северных деревьев, и качается на ветках, — вверх-вниз, — *незримая* кысь, — ... прижимает невидимые уши к плоской невидимой голове, и плачет, голодная, и тянется ... к теплой крови, постукивающей в человеческой шее: кы-ысь! кы-ысь! И тревога холодком, маленькой лапкой тронет сердце, и вздрогнешь ...словно ты сам себе чужой: что это? Кто я?"

By moving closer to Benedikt, the slynx becomes more and more “human,” not only on the level of physical body, but also on the level of the “language” that it possesses. This is not surprising, having in mind that the oppositions of human/non-human do not work properly in Tolstaia’s text. The closest the reader comes to understanding what the slynx “wants to say” is the following passage: “its invisible face grimaces, its claws quiver. It’s hungry, famished. It’s tormented, tormented! Slyyyynnnxxx!”⁴⁴

To see what the slynx may “mean” we have to examine, essentially, Benedikt’s interpretations of what he gets from the communication. While in the beginning of the novel Benedikt’s fear of the slynx does not differ very much from his fear of other post-apocalyptic mutant monsters, as the slynx searches for Benedikt and comes closer, he becomes attracted to it. This attraction is masochistic and voyeuristic in nature: the passages where the slynx is described become longer, more frightening, and more detailed, as if Benedikt savors the ominous presence of the slynx.⁴⁵ Moreover, Benedikt acquires a claw (*kogot’*) when he becomes his father-in-law’s subordinate in the secret police: the police’s weapon is a hook used to pick up the “old-print” books.

Finally, Benedikt commits a murder, which is described in the words that the text up to this point reserved for the slynx:

...His arm could still feel the crunch up to the elbow, the way you squash a beetle: instead of just grabbing the book, jerking it, tearing it away, he caught the Golubchik *right on the neck, on the vein* [italics mine. - DK], and since he whirled

⁴⁴Tolstaya 90. “и кривится невидимое лицо ее, и дрожат когти,— голодно ей, голодно! Мука ей, мука! Кы-ы-ысь! Кы-ы-ысь!”

⁴⁵ Benedikt’s desire for the slynx is sublimated in his love for his colleague Olen’ka and in connection to Olen’ka’s family; the only creatures who have claws in the text are the slynx and Olen’ka’s family.

the hook with unpracticed fingers, the vein snapped and something streamed out...⁴⁶

In the same scene, a sudden shift of perspective, similar to the one in the beginning of the novel, takes place:

...it (the robe) blinded Benedikt for a moment, but the slits settled right over his eyes. He could see everything through this crevice, all human affairs, trivial, cowardly, fussy... but the wind howls, the snowstorm shrieks, *and the Slynx is in flight; it soars, triumphant, over the city* [italics mine. – DK].⁴⁷

Here the border between Benedikt and the slynx, again, collapses for a moment and is later reinstated as Benedikt childishly blames the slynx for compelling him to kill. However, the internalization has already taken place, because Benedikt has committed an act as the slynx and consistent with the “cultural expectations” of the slynx.

Finally, Benedikt “becomes” the slynx when he is labeled as such within language, by his father-in-law. Though in this scene Benedikt does not see himself as the slynx in the mirror, he is both assigned a linguistic label *and* commits an act as the slynx. Therefore, rather than overcoming the cultural and moral constraints of his dystopian milieu, Benedikt is instead subsumed by it: he is tempted by, and falls prey to, something that does not belong to language or humanity and, moreover, effectively voids these. The dystopian milieu of the novel can become so ahistorical, so reliant on superstition and irrationality because it is, in a way, predicated on the existence of the slynx, at least for

⁴⁶ Tolstaya 184. “...рука до локтя чувствовала хруст, вот как жука давишь: вместо того чтоб захватить книгу, да дернуть, да вырвать, — попал голубчику *прямо по шее, по шейной жиле* [italics mine. – DK], а как крюк-то повернул неловкими пальцами, — жила и выдернись, и потекло...”

⁴⁷ Tolstaya 183. “...облокло Бенедикта, ослепило на мгновение, но прореzi сами пали на глаза, все видать как через щель, все дела людские, мелкие, трусливые, копошливые; им бы супу да на лежанку, а ветер воет, выюга свищет, *и кысь — в полете; летит, торжествуя, над городом* [italics mine. – DK]”.

the protagonist whose perspective the reader is given. The slynx becomes the (empty) master signifier that structures the symbolic order of Tolstaia's universe.

Language's ability to account for reality—material, socio-cultural, or political—comes to the forefront of intellectual discussions whenever the reality in question rapidly changes, which makes this ability especially relevant in the post-Soviet context. It seems that *The Slynx* denies this ability by facing the non-linguistic, non-cultural void that the slynx represents. At first glance, *The Slynx* is an über-pessimistic, Orwellian, dystopian narrative as it lets its protagonist be subsumed by the reality he inhabits. The novel provides Benedikt with the means of escape (symbolized by his access to culture), yet does not let him make full use of these means as he confronts the “essence” of his dystopian milieu, the slynx.

Yet, the frightening void that Benedikt faces contains a powerful temptation. The eternal present, the ahistorical temporality that the existence of the slynx in the world of the novel produces, undoubtedly creates an anxiety of estrangement for the reader: such temporality is something that modernity has firmly forgotten about. Nevertheless, this temporality contains a potential that becomes an exciting prospect in the post-Soviet context: the possibility to put the historical (and reliant on the notion of history) framework of modernity on hold to reflect on the possibilities of signification as the former system of signification demonstrates the extent of its dysfunctionality. As *The Slynx* demonstrates, these “other” ways of meaning-production are hardly language-oriented, because of how little language is able to describe the post-apocalyptic reality. However, unable to shed the constraints of textuality,⁴⁸ *The Slynx* launches a search for

⁴⁸ For a discussion of this impossibility, see Chapter 1.

another language, a language that produces meanings in a way that is radically different from the analytic models of modernity.

Thus we find the reliance of Tolstaia's dystopian milieu on the traumatic repetitiveness of incantation. As tempted as one might be to read the floating temporality of the novel (structured by the folkloric, seemingly senseless, linguistic repetition) as *only* traumatic, staging the rupture in the time of national history, another argument can be made. The eternal folkloric present in which the Russia of the future exists in *The Slynx* may well be the post-Blast mutation of the eternal Soviet present. The novel, therefore, does not simply put history on hold to examine the lessons of the past, but simultaneously covers the temporal gap that the collapse of the Soviet narrative produced by recreating, in its own textual space, the illusion of continuity that the Soviet eternal present used to sustain.

Vladimir Sorokin's *The Day of the Oprichnik*: A "Book about the Present"?

Vladimir Sorokin's iconic status in contemporary Russian literature is a sum of his strikingly phantasmatic (and often exceptionally graphic) conceptualist prose and of its remote social effects. Though Sorokin explicitly denies to literature any value except an aesthetic one, he is nonetheless best known in the West as a post-Soviet writer persecuted for his writings, most significantly, for his 1999 novel, *Blue Lard*.⁴⁹ Despite proclamations of art-for-art's-sake, however, Sorokin's texts that followed *Blue Lard* are progressively more engaged with issues of Russian national history as they search for the

⁴⁹The pro-Putin youth organization, "Marching Together" (*Iduschiie Vmeste*) brought charges of pornography on Sorokin in conjunction with one of his novels, *Blue Lard* (*Goluboie Salo*, 1999). Sorokin's ideas about the value of literature, as well as the pornography charges episode, are thoroughly examined in Chapter 1.

hidden meanings of historical events by creating metafictional and/or alternative accounts of Soviet history (in his *Ice* trilogy, 2004-2005).

In 2006, Sorokin comes back to the subject of Russian national past, approaching it from a different perspective. Instead of creating another historiographic metafiction,⁵⁰ Sorokin offers his take on the dystopian genre with a short novel, *The Day of the Oprichnik*. Russia's future, just as it was the case with *The Slynx*, is modeled in the novel on the intellectual construct of national past. If we recall Sorokin's comment about the novel being "of course a book about the present"⁵¹ quoted in the beginning of this chapter, his understanding of Russian national history becomes all the more surprising: the "country's present," which is supposed to bear the seeds of a warning (which a conventional dystopian text communicates) is suspiciously absent from another of Sorokin's musings in the same interview. The view of Russian history that Sorokin conjures ignores the present altogether: "There is much talk about Russia being a fortress. Orthodox churches, autocracy and national traditions are supposed to form a new national ideology. This would mean that Russia would be overtaken by its past, and our past will be our future."⁵² The fact that Sorokin so desperately wants his book to be about the Russian "present" of the 2000s (in which autocracy and national(ist) traditionalism are prominently featured in the context of Putin's presidency) is counteracted by his discursive inability to fit the present as a historical category into his schema of Russian history. Nevertheless, the novel itself becomes a site for this present, as it constructs that

⁵⁰ See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York, 1988), esp. 289, 294.

⁵¹ "Russia Is Slipping Back into an Authoritarian Empire": Spiegel Interview with Author Vladimir Sorokin, Spiegel", trans. Christopher Sultan, in *Spiegel*, Feb 2, 2007.
< <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,463860,00.html>>, accessed Jun 10, 2009.

⁵² "Russia Is Slipping Back into an Authoritarian Empire": Spiegel Interview with Author Vladimir Sorokin, Spiegel", trans. Christopher Sultan, in *Spiegel*, Feb 2, 2007.
< <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,463860,00.html>>, accessed Jun 10, 2009.

which Sorokin's words in the interview lack: a kind of "present tense temporality" that defines the dystopian milieu of the novel.

At first glance, *The Day of the Oprichnik* indeed suggests that history is bound to repeat itself. The short novel is set in 2028, and portrays the dystopian future of Russia where the premise for radical social change is a set of the mysterious "Red, White and Grey Turmoils."⁵³ The last Turmoil is followed by the restoration of absolute monarchy in Russia. A wall is then erected around Russia, whose only international partner remaining is China.

It is this extreme isolation that makes the national past the only accessible cultural repository from which to borrow in order to create a new totalitarian society. Indeed, the new Tsar of Russia reinstalls the *oprichnina*, the paramilitary 16th century organization created by Tsar Ivan the Terrible,⁵⁴ as the all-controlling state institution. Furthermore, the new regime is based on the ideology of "self-determination, Orthodoxy and tradition" (based on slightly mutated, but still recognizably catchy 19th-century nationalist slogan proposed by Minister Uvarov for Tsar Nicholas I⁵⁵). Sticking to the slogan, however,

⁵³ Ostensibly standing for the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, for the collapse of 1991 and for the subsequent move towards autocracy.

⁵⁴ A comprehensive account of the history of *oprichnina* is given in S. B. Veselovskii, *Issledovaniia po istorii oprichniny* (Moscow, 1963). Throughout the twentieth century, historians' assessment of the phenomenon varied from condemnation to, importantly, praise for the role of *oprichnina* in Russia's unification under Ivan the Terrible, which was the official historical assessment during Stalin's era. For a post-Soviet historiographic assessment, see A. Karavashkin and A. Yurganov, "Oprichnina i Strashnyi Sud", in their *Opyt istoricheskoi fenomenologii: Trudnyi put' k ochevidnosti* (Moscow, 2003), 68-115.

⁵⁵ The original slogan is "Absolute monarchy, Orthodoxy, orientedness towards the people" (*samoderzhavie, pravoslaviie, narodnost'*). The role of Count Uvarov's report in Russia's search for the "national idea" in the late nineteenth century is assessed in Richard Worthman, "Ofitsial'naia narodnost' i natsional'nyi mif rossiiskoi monarkhii XIX veka", trans. O. Maiorova, in *Rossii/Russia: Vyp. 3(11): Kul'turnye praktiki v ideologicheskoi perspective. Rossiia, XVIII – nachalo XX veka* (Moscow, 1999), 233-244.

proves to be impossible in Sorokin's dystopian future, as Russian language turns out to be peppered both with archaisms and Chinese words.⁵⁶

On the other hand, many of the unmistakably futuristic elements of the dystopian milieu, like various spins on communication technologies, remain highly visible (all traditionalist ideology notwithstanding) and are used by the regime to exert various forms of control over the population. To reconcile traditionalism with the futuristic aspect of the dystopia, the names for the technologies are archaized and/or Russianized, so that the *oprichniki* are constantly seen chatting on their “*mobilo*”⁵⁷ or watching “*puzyr*” (“bubble”), supposedly a cross between a 3D-television and an Orwellian telescreen.

The protagonist is a middle-ranking member of the secret police, whose day at work the reader follows. Andrei Komiaga goes about his usual day, executing those who are not loyal to the regime and raping their wives (not because he is in any way “evil,” but because it is a custom); taking on a delivery task on the orders of the Tsarina; sorting out the money issues that the *oprichnina* has with Customs; ensuring that the new show performed for the Kremlin's aristocratic elite is ideologically sound; taking a steam bath with other members of *oprichnina*; taking part in another execution; and finally getting home, exhausted. He then falls asleep to face another day just like the one the reader witnessed.

We can assume the extreme predictability of Komiaga's existence for two reasons. Firstly, the title of *The Day of the Oprichnik* is a pun on the actual content of the

⁵⁶ For more on Sorokin's imagining of the future of the Russian language, see Chapter 1.

⁵⁷ The archaization/Russianization occurs here by adding a neuter gender ending to the transliteration of an English word, with the resulting neologism morphologically resembling pattern of forming nouns to denote instruments from past participles of the verbs, characteristic of Old Russian.

novel;⁵⁸ while the novel depicts one day in the life of an *oprichnik*, the title can be read in two ways – either referring to a particular day in the life of a particular *oprichnik*, or to the fact that the “day,” the era depicted in the novel belongs to the *oprichniki*, as the Russian possessive construction allows for both interpretations. The sense of an era of doom, conveyed by the second interpretation, contributes to the effect of post-apocalyptic, and, in a way, post-historic temporality.⁵⁹

Secondly, the novel opens with a dream sequence, the same dream sequence that it will fade into in the end. This dream sequence establishes the mode of narration which the rest of the novel is to follow, overloaded with folk motifs, repetitions and parallel constructions. In the dream, the first-person narrator, yet unknown to the reader, follows a magical white horse that for the narrator comes to symbolize “everything, all of my life, all of my destiny, all my luck.”⁶⁰ The dream, the narrator says, is “the same again”: he goes after the horse, but it does not notice the narrator, or anyone else for that matter, and “goes away, leaves me, goes away forever, goes away, for all eternity it goes away, goes away, goes, goes away.”⁶¹

When the narrator awakens and the dystopian milieu is painstakingly established in great detail in the next several pages, the meaning of the dream becomes suspiciously

⁵⁸ It is also an evident pun on the title of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s famous *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962): Sorokin’s protagonist can be read as a satire of Ivan Denisovich (they both possess a kind of uncanny honesty, which in the case of Sorokin’s protagonist is perverse as he is committing monstrous acts and still remains honest and even likeable).

⁵⁹ In opposition to this striving towards genre conformity stands Komiaga’s constant analysis of the sociopolitical situation in the year 2028, which suggests that historical time does not come to a complete halt in this dystopian milieu (as was the case with Tolstaia’s *The Slynx*). This supports Tchantsev’s argument about Sorokin’s dystopia being a more immediate reaction to the current political situation, as the political dynamics of Sorokin’s dystopian society ostensibly mirror (and/or extrapolate on) those observed in Russia in the 2000s.

⁶⁰ The Russian text is cited from Vladimir Sorokin, *Den’ Oprichnika*, online version at <http://lib.aldebaran.ru/author/sorokin_vladimir/sorokin_vladimir_den_oprichnika/>, accessed March 10, 2009. “вся жизнь, вся судьба моя, вся удача”.

⁶¹ Ibid. “а он все так же неспешно удаляется, ничего и никого не замечая, навсегда уходит, уходит от меня, уходит навеки, уходит бесповоротно, уходит, уходит, уходит...”

obvious: the narrator experiences, unconsciously, some loss of great significance (“everything”), but in his conscious state he is sure that everything is perfectly well as he goes about his day with very little hesitation. Thus, the dystopian milieu is established not only on the level of detailed descriptions of distorted everyday practices that blend futuristic motives with old Russian cultural customs, but also on the level of the “moral” attitude that the reader is supposed to adopt, as we come to know on a very intimate level that something is wrong with the world (and the psyche) that repeatedly produces such dreams. In any case, on the purely stylistic level, there seems to be very little difference between the way Komiaga frames his conscious and unconscious content, as his musings about the fate of Russia, just as his thoughts about the everyday issues, are organized along the same stylistic lines of repetition, parallelism, and excessive synonymizing.

The obsessive attention to detail in the exposition reveals a tension between the *method* of creating an alternative reality, which is supposed to be dystopian, and the *effect* the first-person narration produces. This narration produces an interesting twist on the cautionary tale: the reader is to an extent caught in between the dystopian premise of the novel and the inescapable identification with the protagonist’s non-critical, even positive, attitude to his dystopian society. Thus, the following description in the exposition, slow-paced, filled with stylistic inversions in the original, hardly contributes to creating a dystopian milieu:

They bow from the waist to me. I nod to them, passing. The floorboards crack.

They open the door for me, the door coated with iron. To the yard I go. Sunny day it is, with a bit of frost. More snow fell during the night – on the firs, on the fence,

on the little guard tower it lays. Snow is good! The earthly shame it covers. And the soul is cleansed by it.⁶²

For the protagonist, then, his milieu is definitely not dystopian. His attitude towards the winter landscape is structured by classic tropes of Russian Romantic nationalism.⁶³ Such idealized descriptions suggest that for the protagonist his milieu is utopian; this is a drastic departure from classic dystopian narrative dynamics, where the protagonist is either already or about to be disenchanted with his environment. The reader, then, is put into an impossible position, identifying with something with which they should not be identifying.

Read from the premise that the novel is dystopian and socially critical towards the reality it creates, Komiaga's obsessive mode of narration is supposed to cover over the ugly truths about the society portrayed in the novel. However, if we assume that the subjective narration opens up a utopian space in the middle of dystopia, the structure of the novel predicated on repetition may mean something entirely different: the repetitive elements' main function then is to blur the line between the protagonist's personal utopia and the reader's dystopia. Komiaga's discursive repetitiveness accomplishes two things simultaneously: for him, it structures and legitimizes reality (which he is unaware is dystopian). For the reader, it serves as retardation as it conceals the monstrous social and cultural practices of the Russia of the future. Because of the excessive repetition (and

⁶² In the translation, I made an attempt to preserve the stylistic inversion. "Кланяются в пояс. Киваю им, проходя. Скрипят половицы. Отворяют дверь кованую. Выхожу на двор. День солнечный выдался, с морозцем. Снега за ночь подсыпало — на елях, на заборе, на башенке сторожевой. Хорошо, когда снег! Он срам земной прикрывает. И душа чище от него делается".

⁶³ Russian Romantic nationalism favored the inversion of word order to add folk flavor to sentence structures, and eagerly found philosophical and emotional meanings in the elements of nature. A discussion of Russian Romantic nationalism and its political and ideological implications is given in Susanna Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism* (New York, State University of New York Press, 2006).

because of the almost inevitable identification with the protagonist), it becomes exceptionally hard to perceive the hangings, dismemberments and political oppression in the novel at their conventional moral value.

This is one of the main reasons why *The Day of the Oprichnik*, which is supposed to be a cautionary tale, is, paradoxically, nostalgic. The proclaimed warning about the authoritarian future of Russia is simultaneously constructed and concealed by the first-person narration, through which the text revels in an idealized (national) past. The identification with the protagonist indeed proved to be powerful enough: Sorokin's "sequel" to, or rather an expansion of, *The Day of the Oprichnik*, *Sugar Kremlin* (2008), is vaguely apologetic. Sorokin's comments upon publishing *Sugar Kremlin* (a collection of dystopian short stories set in the same universe as *The Day*) suggest that the collection was, in a way, written to prove that *The Day* was indeed a dystopian novel:

The Day of the Oprichnik still was monological, not enough for me, I was lacking polyphony from the other inhabitants [of this universe]. *Sugar Kremlin* is a frame of sorts. Perhaps, for me this frame was even more valuable than *The Day of the Oprichnik*: I just enjoyed the details of the picture.⁶⁴

The cautious formulas, "was not enough for me" and "perhaps..." frame the notion that the enjoyment that Sorokin derives from creating the dystopian milieu turns out to be based on the text's polyphonic quality. This is significant, because the choice of a compliant insider as protagonist and narrator of a cautionary tale undoubtedly

⁶⁴ Vladimir Sorokin, "V Mavzoleie dolzhen lezhat' Ivan Groznyi": Vladimir Sorokin o svoiei novoi knige", in *Kommersant*, 2008, No. 149 (3966), <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc-rss.aspx?DocsID=1014309>>, accessed March 12, 2009. "День опричника" все же был монологичен, мне не хватало многоголосья других ее [этой вселенной] обитателей. "Сахарный Кремль" — некая рама. Может, она была для меня даже ценнее "Дня опричника": я просто наслаждался подробностями".

diminishes the impact of the social critique that the novel performs. Sorokin cautiously admits as much, and he theorizes this “unintended effect” in another interview:

When I was writing *The Day of the Oprichnik*, this was largely a search for a metaphor for contemporary Russia. On the other hand, this was a cartoon, a grotesque. And I managed to create a warning, too – a friend of mine told me about it. He said, “you wrote an incantation of a kind, an incantation against all of this happening.” But by the time of writing *Sugar Kremlin*, I got a feeling that everything [that I was writing about] can really happen, that the path Russia chooses may well end [the way I imagined]. And the first readers of *Sugar Kremlin*, apparently, felt that: nearly everyone said that this is a much scarier book than *The Day of the Oprichnik*.⁶⁵

Sorokin’s “friend,” real or imagined, pinpoints the most striking feature of the text: the novel is an incantation against this [future] happening (“*zagovor, chtoby etogo ne sluchilos*”). That the novel becomes an incantation, in a way, denies Sorokin’s assurance that it is a political satire of the present. Instead, the present that the text is “about” emerges not only as a current sociopolitical reality containing a warning about the future, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a textual site where incantations hold the power to change the world. It is a temporality Komiaga already inhabits and Sorokin would desperately want to have in his own present: if the Russian sociopolitical

⁶⁵ “Vsem lizat’ Sakharnyi Kreml: Interv’ju s Vladimirom Sorokinym o novoi knige”, in Stringer Portal, August 2008. <<http://www.stringer.ru/publication.mhtml?Part=49&PubID=9852>>, accessed March 12, 2009. “Когда я писал ‘День опричника’, это во многом было поиском метафоры для современной России. С другой стороны, это был и шарж, и гротеск. И предостережение из этого получилось – об этом мне сказал один мой друг. Ты, говорит, написал такой как бы заговор, чтобы этого не случилось. Но к моменту написания ‘Сахарного Кремля’ у меня появилось ощущение, что все это и вправду может быть, что путь, который выбирает Россия, может именно этим и кончиться. И первые читатели ‘Сахарного Кремля’, видимо, это почувствовали: почти все они сказали, что это более страшная книга, чем ‘День опричника’”.

reality of the 2000s bears the seeds of authoritarianism, in Sorokin's interpretation it also bears seeds of utopia, predicated on the power of the spoken word. This is also a *literary* utopia, where the literary text has the power to influence history.⁶⁶

The pre-modern belief in the powers of interpellation, in the magic language, paradoxically, finds a parallel in logocentrism that is traditionally associated with modern Russian culture.⁶⁷ The cautionary nature of the tale that *The Day of the Oprichnik* tells, then, is predicated not just on the relatively recent Russian notion that literature is meant to be a guiding force for social change (as formulated by the preeminent 19th-century Russian scholar Vissarion Belinskii⁶⁸ and later reinforced by Stalin's characteristic of writers as "engineers of human souls"⁶⁹ that will come to define the ideology of Socialist Realism). The early 19th-century Romantic notion of "poet as a prophet"⁷⁰ is resurrected here in its original meaning, stripped of any metaphoricity.⁷¹

The scholars of Sorokin note his texts' exceptional preoccupation with ritualistic practices.⁷² While *The Day of the Oprichnik* is less concerned with formal

⁶⁶ For more on the changing role of literature and the writers' struggle with the change in the post-Soviet context, see Chapter 1.

⁶⁷ Logocentrism is conventionally posited as a characteristic of cultural production that is "endemic" to Russia. In the post-Soviet context, logocentrism often becomes a subject of both fascination and critique: as evidenced by an opinion expressed by Mikhail Epstein in a conference presentation cited below: "Russian logocentrism [is] the love for verbal expression which remains strikingly indifferent to the world of objects" (for a discussion of philosophical implications of logocentrism, see Mikhail Epstein, "The Philosophical Implications of Russian Conceptualism," paper delivered at AAASS Annual Meeting (Washington, D.C.), 29 October 1995). For more discussion of logocentrism, see the section above on *The Slynx*.

⁶⁸ See esp. Belinskii's *Vzgliad na Russkuiu Literaturu 1846* (Vissarion Belinskii, *Vzgliad na Russkuiu Literaturu 1846 goda* (Moskva, Goslitizdat, 1955)). The mythologizes status of Russian literature is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

⁶⁹ Stalin borrows a formula from writer Yuri Olesha and first uses it at a 1932 meeting with Soviet writers at Maksim Gor'kii's residence.

⁷⁰ Prominently featured in the poetry of major Russian Romantic writers, most importantly, Aleksandr Pushkin and, to an extent, Mikhail Lermontov.

⁷¹ This is in line with constant dismantling of metaphors that is a prominent feature of Sorokin's literary style.

⁷² Galina Nefagina, *Russkaia proza kontsa XX veka* (Moscow, Flinta-Nauka, 2003), 268. Also see Svetlana Beliaieva-Konegen, "Khorosho zabytoie, ili Rasstreliat' bez suda (o prose V. Sorokina)", in *Strelets*, 1992,

experimentation with stylistic and narrative conventions than earlier Sorokin texts, its “universe” is nevertheless exceptionally dependent on ritualistic repetition, and not only on the conceptual level. Beside the text being an “incantation” against history repeating itself, the dystopian society is also structured by repetitive, highly mysticized everyday practices. On the stylistic level, the text is not only obsessed with details of the dystopian milieu, which is an anticipated effect of the genre, but also structures the dystopian psyche as completely dependent on the belief in the power of repetition.

Sorokin’s *oprichnina* must be one of the most obsessive “secret brotherhoods” ever depicted in literature. The work of *oprichnina* acquires mystic qualities very early on, as every action of *oprichnina* is accompanied with elaborate rituals. If the novel is to be read as an unproblematic cautionary tale, these rituals are supposed to legitimize the violence that the *oprichnina* commits. The *oprichniki* behave like model illustrations of Vladimir Propp’s folk-tale lack that can be only covered by compulsive adherence to a magical structure manifested in magic numbers.⁷³ Thus, they are required (and, seemingly, feel compelled) to cry out three times before entering the compound of a disloyal *boyarin*, walk around it three times clockwise and proclaim “woe to this home,” also three times, before they are “allowed” to enter.

Being, of course, a satire of police procedure, this elaborate ritual is, nonetheless, much more than mere satire; the sheer amount of rituals that govern the work of *oprichnina* suggests an excess of performativity that, in the dystopian reading, masks the morally compromised meaning of the acts that the *oprichnina* commits. However, this excess is perhaps a little too “excessive”. The excess reveals itself not only on the level of

No. 2, (Paris, New York, Moscow), 150-153. Also, see Svetlana Beliaieva-Konegen, “Khorosho Zabytoie, ili rasstreliat’ bez suda (o proze V. Sorokina)” (Paris-New York, Strelets, 1992, #2), 150-153.

⁷³ See esp. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (University of Texas Press, 1968), 25.

content (the immense violence and depravity that nearly all the deeds of *oprichnina* exhibit), but also on the level of linguistic organization of this content. Thus, a *boyarin*'s⁷⁴ compound is surrounded “so that not even an evil mouse can sneak through, so that not an insidious mosquito can fly through.”⁷⁵ This extension on a trite Russian metaphor (“*chtoby mysh' ne probezhala*”, “so that a mouse can't sneak through”) is not only excessive because the metaphor takes more space in the text. Through reactivating the actual metaphoricity of the expression by juxtaposing the trite metaphor with a made-up one, the scene acquires a surprisingly paranoid quality, so that mice and mosquitoes that are not supposed to get through become very real enemies. This fits very well, however, into the undercurrent of the pagan, folkloric mindset by which the *oprichnina* is guided.⁷⁶

The reliance on ritual that Sorokin's dystopian milieu exhibits plays into the predictability of existence in Sorokin's Russia of the future, the predictability that, as we have seen, operates on many levels of the text. The predictability of the future, in the Russian context, is an especially relevant social concern, a concern that complicates the dystopian premise of the novel. No matter how “bad” the future of Russia turns out to be in Sorokin's text, the very fact that it is allowed to appear there is significant. The “explosion” of dystopian texts in Russian literature of the mid-2000s, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, may signify the end of the pause where Russian culture found itself in the 1990s. Sorokin's dystopia, among other dystopian texts of the period, makes

⁷⁴ In the Middle Ages, the term *boyarin* denoted a Russian noble; the term is used in the novel to indicate a member of new Russian aristocracy.

⁷⁵ “Обложена усадьба со всех сторон еще с ночи... Чтобы мышь зловредная не пробежала, чтобы комар злокозненный не пролетел”.

⁷⁶ The *oprichnina* is also fervently religious (Orthodox Christian), which reiterates the perennial tension between Christianity and paganism in the conventional Russian belief system.

predictions about the relatively immediate future of the country; by satirizing current sociopolitical reality, it not only begins to feel comfortable about making sociopolitical and cultural predictions, but also, implicitly, resurrects the future as a functional category of history. Sorokin's own *Ice Trilogy*, an arc of novels from the 1990s that are arguably dystopian, is set in a "parallel reality" of sorts, without explicit references to any temporal category of history. *The Day of the Oprichnik*, on the other hand, by formally and explicitly being set in the future, signifies the reemergence of the future as a conceptual category of historical temporality in Russian culture, no matter how perverse this resurrection comes to be in its reliance on the national past.

Still, the future of Russia in *The Day of the Oprichnik* is imagined to possess the temporality that is, in essence, devoid of the flow of time, and structured by magical beliefs, which we have observed in two incarnations in the earlier post-Soviet dystopias. Sorokin's text, while undoubtedly reacting to sociopolitical changes and therefore establishing a certain immediacy of its vision of the future, nevertheless borrows the system of signification that is supposed to describe this future from the legacy of the 1990s. In the 2000s, the new set of fantasies about what the future should (not) be still relies on the eternal, never-ending present, the time of the Soviet epic (to borrow from Bakhtin via Clark again), and on the system of signification associated with this time.

This sort of cultural "inertia", as it seems, lies in the perverse (and, in the Russian context, nostalgic) appeal of a utopian "no-place" that, at least from within, for the texts' protagonists, is devoid of a characteristically post-Soviet anxiety about the nature of historical process. Disillusioned with the compromised teleologically Marxist model of history in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, the texts nonetheless cling to the

memory of functional teleology, and, paradoxically, do so by crafting their versions of the future as places possessing a radically different temporality. This temporality ignores the conventional framework of past, present and future because it denies the flow of time itself. As post-Soviet culture maps the semiotic and temporal similarities between the folkloric imagination and Soviet mythology, both the eternal present of magic fairy tale and the Great Time of Socialist Realist text quell the post-Soviet uncertainties about the historical process by being nostalgically recreated in the space of a literary text.

CHAPTER 4¹

The Dead Cosmonauts: Soviet Hero in Post-Soviet Space.

*News from the Russian Mission Control Center: Today, the Russian Space Agency de-orbited The Mir Space Station. Large fragments were scuttled in the Pacific. Smaller fragments burned upon entering the Earth's atmosphere. Tomorrow, our cosmonauts are planning... Fuck! Our cosmonauts! (A Russian anekdot)*²

Soviet Science Fiction's Dead Cosmonauts: the Foundations of the Myth

On March 23, 1961, less than a month before Yuri Gagarin successfully orbited the Earth, a Soviet cosmonaut-in-training, Valentin Bondarenko, died in a training accident in a pressure chamber at the Institute for Biomedical Studies in Moscow. In the incident that will in 2008 become one of the plot lines for Aleksei Gherman's film about the Soviet space program, *Paper Soldier*, Bondarenko burned alive in the oxygen-rich atmosphere of the chamber. No mention of this incident appeared in press before 1986, when Yaroslav Golovanov's article in the "Izvestiia" newspaper was published to give what he called a "truthful" account of the events³. Golovanov's struggle for truthfulness pertains, perhaps, less to the actual circumstances of the incident than to the fact that he takes a stand against the corpus of conspiratorial publications that can be called "the tales of the lost cosmonauts," launched by a *Readers Digest* article, published in April 1965 in the US. The article claimed that several cosmonauts were lost in space during secret

¹ A version of a part of this chapter appeared in: Daria Kabanova, "Mourning the Mimesis: Aleksei Fedorchenko's First on the Moon and the post-Soviet Practice of Writing History", *Studies in Slavic Cultures X*, "Postmodernism" (2011).

² "Репортаж из ЦУПа, ведущий берет интервью у руководителя ЦУПа: "Сегодня Российское Космическое Агенство затопило станцию "Мир". Большие осколки станции были сведены с орбиты и затоплены в Тихом Океане. Малые осколки сгорели при входе в плотные слои атмосферы. Завтра наши космонавты планируют... б*ять!!!!... Наши космонавты!!!!"

³ The incident is later mentioned in Golovanov's book (Yaroslav Golovanov, *Kosmonavt # 1*. Moskva: Izvestiia, 1986).

training flights; “strange” radio signals received by Italian amateur space watchers were cited in the article as proof of the fact that Soviet Union had several space missions stranded in orbit, intentionally or unintentionally. This story of “lost cosmonauts” undermined one of the Soviet myths upon which the state’s symbolic validation was built.

The Space Race gave birth to tens of songs, hundreds of books and thousands of monuments to Yuri Gagarin (a process that, significantly, intensified after his accidental death in 1967), as well as metaphorization of national pride through the images associated with the Soviet space program.⁴ The Space Race, a crucial site for the competition of ideologies during the Cold War, created an important part of Soviet mythological framework: the story of the Soviet space program and its successes, just as its American counterpart during the Cold War, goes beyond any military applications and comes to be a source of national pride, as it literally translates technological achievement into an ideological one. The Space Race exemplifies the uneasy relationship the Soviet state had with the legacy of Leon Trotsky’s dreams of world revolution.

Even after Stalin effectively put an end to these dreams, the dream of space exploration is a function of an unmistakably revolutionary (and Trotskyite) desire to ideologically appropriate outer space itself. An example of the romantic revolutionary sentiment at work in mythologizing the dream of space exploration is the 1936 film, *Kosmicheskii Reis* (*Cosmic Journey* or *Space Voyage*), a silent feature directed by Vassilii Zhuravlev. In the film, outer space becomes an important site for Socialist “colonization.” *Kosmicheskii Reis*’s (critically acclaimed) special effects are mostly

⁴ Thus, a 1960s song sums up the Soviet cultural and technological achievement as “We build rockets, and also in the sphere of ballet we’re ahead of all the planet.”

focused on creating the illusion of weightlessness and freedom of movement that the first space travelers experience on the Moon. The film thus can be read as the romantic interpretation of Communism as freedom, in line with the ideas of early Russian revolutionary discourse.⁵

The invalidation of the significant Soviet myth that the conspiracy theory of lost cosmonauts performs will make the corpus of cultural fantasies that deal with lost or dead cosmonauts particularly pertinent in the post-Soviet cultural context, when the Soviet mythology becomes a subject of deconstruction. The *Reader's Digest* article introduced the image of the dead body in orbit that must remain there for all eternity: "There is an eerie possibility that a long-dead Russian astronaut is today hurtling silently through space at thousands of miles an hour - the victim of a Soviet space shot that went wrong. His body perfectly preserved by intense cold, he may be a lonely wanderer in space for centuries to come."⁶ Readily observable in this paragraph are the motifs of the peculiar temporality of outer space, devoid of measurable time, and of the immutable nature of the objects that are forever suspended in that space. All of this creates a set of images that contribute to a fantasy that is powerful because of the "natural" metonymic connection between the images of the body, the eternal questions of life and death, and the ideological notions upon which the myth of the "conquest" of the Cosmos is predicated.

⁵ In a post-Soviet film, *First on the Moon* (2004, dir. Aleksei Fedorchenko), outer space becomes a critical site for Socialist expansion in the 1930s, with the offscreen narrator informing the spectators that "it was a time where people lived by the idea of planetary revolution, dreamed of the Cosmic Soviet Republic" (*mechtali o kosmicheskoi respublike Sovetov*).

⁶ J.T. Ratcliff, "Italy's Amazing Amateur Space Watchers", in *Reader's Digest*, April 1965, 115-117. Online version available at <<http://web.archive.org/web/20031002125716/lostcosmonauts.com/readers.htm>>, accessed April 1, 2009. Also on this conspiracy theory see: James Oberg, *Uncovering Soviet Disasters* (Random House, New York, 1988).

This conspiracy theory and its paranoid structure provide a surprisingly accurate insight into the mechanisms of the myth's functioning, exposing the structures that the ideology behind the myth would technically want to conceal but cannot help making visible. While the Soviet media and official discourse were, of course, extremely hesitant to acknowledge any kind of accident involving cosmonauts, in space or on Earth, socialist science fiction,⁷ on the other hand, produced a substantial number of texts that feature images and motifs of dead, dying, or mutilated cosmonauts. Following Katerina Clark's suggestion to treat Socialist Realist texts primarily in their mythological function,⁸ I will now look at the ways in which the fantasy of the cosmonauts dead and forever lost in space elucidates the ideological content of the myth of the conquest of the Cosmos.

Already in the "proto-Socialist Realist" novel, Aleksei Tolstoi's *Aelita* (1923), outer space becomes the place to long for, an object of desire for the protagonist Mikhail Los'. Los' goes to Mars because outer space holds a promise for him: he hopes that there, "beyond the threshold of Earth and the threshold of death,"⁹ he will be able to forget the

⁷ A note is in order about the place of science fiction within Soviet cultural production. While some scholars, like Matthias Schwarz, argue that Socialist science fiction goes against Socialist realist method by depicting the remote future when Socialist Realism's main focus is the immediate future, I rather side with others like Elana Gomel. Following her, I treat science fiction as a paradoxically logical development of the Socialist Realist method. Science fiction produces an "excess" of realism by creating an entirely new reality, thus taking the Socialist Realist utopian and futuristic modality to its ultimate point. Science fiction takes the call of the Congress of Socialist Writers made in 1934 to depict reality not as it is, but as it should be, literally, by *creating* this reality. Escapist as science fiction is, it nevertheless uses the Socialist Realist method while seemingly distancing itself from its conventional subject matter. See Matthias Schwarz, *Die Erfindung des Kosmos: Zur sowjetischen Science Fiction und popularwissenschaftlichen Publizistik vom Sputnikflug bis zum Ende der Tauwetterzeit* (Berliner Slawistische Arbeiten, no. 22. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004). A similar opinion is held by John Glad (John P. Glad, *Extrapolations from Dystopia: A Critical Study of Soviet Science Fiction* (Princeton: Kingston Press, 1982); and Elana Gomel, "Gods like Men: Soviet Science Fiction and the Utopian Self", in *Science Fiction Studies*, 2004, Vol. 31, No. 3, Soviet Science Fiction: The Thaw and After, 358-377.

⁸ Clark 1981, 252.

⁹ *Aelita* is cited from Aleksei Tolstoi, *Aelita*. <http://az.lib.ru/t/tolstoj_a_n/text_0160.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2009.

loss of his beloved wife. Yet, Los' is unsure whether outer space will hold true to its promise, because he realizes that he, the living being, has no place in outer space: to truly belong here he has to become "slumbering ice crystals that fly there, unawakened."¹⁰ Fear prompts him to ask somebody to accompany him to Mars; he is afraid that if his calculations are incorrect, he will remain in space for all eternity. He describes this through a striking image of a "chilled corpse in the dark," thus problematizing his own feeling for the "slumbering ice crystals" that have the same fate of flying in space forever. Los's longing for outer space is, then, ambiguous: tempted by its atemporality and the promise of forgetting, Los' is nonetheless fearful of this temptation.

In the later examples of Ivan Efremov's *The Andromeda Nebula* ("Tumannost' Andromedy", 1957) and Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii's *The Land of Crimson Clouds* ("Strana Bagrovykh Tuch", 1959), ideological meanings are explicitly attached to death in space. In an episode of *The Andromeda Nebula*, the crew discovers a long-lost spaceship from Earth with nobody inside. The recorded message in the captain's log forewarns the crew of the dangers that they are about to face. The moment of the crew's death inside the lost spaceship is recorded on tape, too, providing the present crew with all the necessary tips to eventually be able to capture the deadly alien life form and transport it to Earth for further research. While the crew that perished is, of course, mourned by the present crew, their death proves to be actually useful not only for the present crew's research mission, but also in their soul-searching: they leave the planet assured that they are able to face any adversity, having refueled their spaceship using the

¹⁰ Ibid.

other spaceship's fuel supplies that are conveniently available now that the original crew has little use for them.¹¹

In *The Land of Crimson Clouds*, the space crew lands on Venus, which in the novel's universe has become a critical site of the human conquest of outer space. The (Communist) society of the future is in an energy crisis due to the rapid development of technology; the society is ready to mine the radioactive ore reserves Venus is said to possess. The crew of the present mission is stunned to intercept a radio signal on Venus; upon approaching the source of the signal they discover a mangled spaceship with a lone (and dead) space explorer inside: "The transmitter was working, little green and blue lights behind the broken dials trembled. And at the transmitter there sat a dead man, his shaggy head, bandaged by grey rags, on his chest."¹²

The contrast between the personification in the description of the transmitter and the dead body of the space explorer is striking; the functional interchange between the lifeless body and the "alive" transmitter turns a dead body into a beacon that establishes the presence of humans on Venus by constantly transmitting the radio signal.¹³ The dead body in the spaceship becomes a symbol of a stage in the conquest of Venus, forever

¹¹ In another episode of *Andromeda Nebula*, the spaceship crew discovers a dead planet, the inhabitants of which were ostensibly frozen to death because they did not listen to warnings about misusing the planet's natural resources. The crew observes a "glass grave" where, among others, a man is sitting "with insane, scary eyes looking into the distance." The frozen people ("not Earthlings, but definitely human"), though they do not fall very neatly in the core narrative of the myth of the cosmonauts lost in space, nonetheless introduce a very important feature of the myth: they become eternal symbols, in this case of stupidity and carelessness, which the captain of the spaceship confirms. These people are bound to stay in their glass grave forever, forever fulfilling their didactic function, cautioning people against misusing natural resources. Interestingly, it is precisely through their death that they are able to play such an important role in (and for) the Communist society of the future that Efremov's novel is set in.

¹² *The Land of Crimson Clouds* is cited from Arkadii i Boris Strugatskii, *Strana Bagrovyykh Tuch*. Strugatskii, Arkadii, and Boris Strugatskii. *Strana Bagrovyykh Tuch (The Land of Crimson Clouds)* (Moskva: Ast, 1999), 239.

¹³ This runs parallel to the present crew's mission to install the radio transmitters so that the future spaceships can safely land on the planet's surface.

installed as a perverse and immutable monument to this conquest, transmitting its death for every space traveler to reflect upon.

The crew is deeply moved by this death, pondering the extent of the feat that they themselves need to perform. This death is inspirational, but what exactly it inspires becomes evident when one crew member gives a little eulogy, saying that the space explorer died “like a Real Man” (*nastoiashchii chelovek*). Here, the actual content of the fantasy of dead bodies in space is revealed: the crew member refers to the space explorer using the same metaphor that Boris Polevoi used for Aleksei Meres’iev, a World War II pilot who lost his legs but persevered in rejoining the ranks after having learned to pilot with artificial limbs.

Polevoi’s *A Story about a Real Man* (*Povest’ o nastoiashchem cheloveke*, 1946) follows the events of Meres’iev’s life, narrating the circumstances of his trauma, his despair upon losing his legs and eventual spiritual recovery, followed by a physical one. The inspirational example that Meres’iev (Mares’iev in Polevoi’s novel) follows is, of course, the iconic hero of Socialist Realist literature, the *avant la lettre* Real Man, Pavka Korchagin from Nikolai Ostrovskii’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* (*Kak zakalialas’ stal’*, 1932). Like Pavka, Mares’iev becomes physically disabled while in the service of the Soviet state, and, like Pavka, he is compelled to be again useful to the state. And, as it is the case with Pavka, Mares’iev’s ability to overcome all sorts of adversities, surprisingly, does not make him a hero: it is his mutilated body that does.

In her *How the Soviet Man Was (Un)Made*, Lilya Kaganovsky suggests that Pavka Korchagin’s mutilated body, paradoxically, is what makes him into the ideal

subject of the state.¹⁴ Kaganovsky's argument is based on Slavoj Žižek's discussion of what the political regime wants from its subjects. The regime, Žižek argues in a Lacanian development on the social contract theory, demands that its subjects forego *jouissance*, i.e., the desire for pleasure beyond the limit imposed by the Law,¹⁵ in the name of the greater good. However, according to Žižek this is not enough. While the Law explicitly asks the subject to sacrifice something, it also implicitly asks them to enjoy repressing *jouissance*, i.e., to consent to (and be content to) forego it, which, Žižek suggests, results in a perfect ambiguity of pleasure and pain.

Pavka's mutilated body represents the ultimate sacrifice that the state requires of its subjects. Pavka's Communist spirit is reinforced as his body becomes progressively more disabled. The pure spirit, which is distilled out of the noncompliance of Pavka's body with his mind's revolutionary aspirations, is what destroys the conventional reliance of subjectivity on the physical body. Pavka is able to overcome the challenge that the loss of bodily ability presents to him by becoming a symbol of pure spirit, as evidenced by his career as a writer, i.e., a figure that in the Russian cultural context has been invested with spiritual (and inspirational) meanings since the 19th century.

The next "Real Man" in the line-up, Mares'iev, does not get as close to becoming a pure, disembodied spirit of Communism as does Pavka. Yet, it is his injury that transforms him from a common pilot into a truly heroic one. The famous episode from Aleksandr Stolper's 1949 film adaptation of *A Story about a Real Man*, where Mares'iev

¹⁴ Lilya Kaganovsky, "How the Soviet Man Was (Un)Made", in *Slavic Review*, 2004, Vol. 63, No. 3, 577-596. For a discussion of Mares'iev, see also: Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity Under Stalin* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), esp. 119-145, 174.

¹⁵ The Lacanian term *jouissance* refers to the enjoyment that is beyond the pleasure principle. See Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious", in Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (NY, W.W. Norton, 2006), 671-703, esp. 696.

performs, on his artificial limbs, a Russian folk dance to convince the doctors that he is fit to fly again, attests to the *excess* of what he has set out to accomplish. The dance Mares'iev performs is not a physical requirement for flying; however, the joyful display of excessive devotion *is*. Whether Mares'iev is more successful as a fighter pilot after his injury than before is immaterial; it is not the degree of actual usefulness to the state that matters, but rather Mares'iev's symbolic value as a person who less respects the needs of his body than the interest of the state in having as many pilots as possible, even (and more so) if those are “damaged” pilots.

For the Soviet cosmonauts, it seems, “just” bodily injuries and disabilities are not enough to turn them into ideal subjects of the state. They have to die because they are supposed to perform the most symbolically important task that the Soviet power can require of its subjects: the conquest of a space that transcends the more-or-less conventional ideological considerations of revolutionary struggle or of defending the country from external and internal enemies. Thus the requirements for the greatness of the feat that the cosmonauts are asked to perform are stricter, as are the obligations imposed on their bodies and subjectivities to be in full service of the state. This is because they enable the power of the state to transcend the limits of space (and, as we will see, time); their feat takes place in a space that is nothing but sublime. This (outer) space lends a sublime quality to their feats.

Thus, the eulogy by the crew member from *Land of Crimson Clouds* pinpoints the nature of the problem: the space explorer *had* to die to perversely validate the quest for the planet's natural resources, and consequently, to become a didactic and inspirational symbol of this quest. He had to sacrifice himself for the greater good, be that the demands

of the Communist civilization on Earth, or the spirit of scientific exploration that characterizes Strugatskii's Communist universe. His death fixes him forever in his function as the symbol of progress and of Communist spirit.

Unlike other deaths for the cause, however, the dead cosmonaut is probably much more suited to the inspirational goals of Communist ideology than the vast range of sacrifices of life and body that it commonly utilizes.¹⁶ This is because of the peculiar property of the body in space that Aleksei Tolstoi already notes and the *Readers Digest* conspiracy theory savors: it is there to remain for eternity. Therefore, the inspirational story that the dead body tells always has a very physical referent, even if it floats in the dark and is invisible to the people on Earth. The body of the dead cosmonaut is thus simultaneously concealed and revealed.¹⁷ The ideological meanings attached to the body that floats in space are thus exceptionally stable, because the body will be there when the need to refer to it arises. The perverse ideological stability of meaning that the body of the dead cosmonaut provides makes it into the perfect building block for creating myth.

Let us go back to Tolstoi's novel and Mikhail Los's ambiguous attitude towards outer space. Los' is torn between the longing for peaceful, atemporal amnesia that he thinks outer space will provide, and the fear of the sublime eternity. In other words, he longs for and is afraid of one and the same property of outer space, namely, the absence of conventional historical temporality that measures and makes time discrete, assigning a temporal frame to the events that happen within it. The temptation and fear that the

¹⁶ Numerous examples can be cited here, from Arkadii Gaidar's *Military Secret* ("Voiennoiaina Taina," 1935) to the explosion of novelized biographies of primarily young (and almost invariably dead) heroes of the Great Patriotic War in the late 1940s and early 1950s, like Aleksandr Fadeev's *Young Guard* ("Molodaia Gvardiia", 1951), Lev Kassil's *The Younger Son Street* ("Ulitsa Mladshego Syna", 1949), Lyubov' Kosmodem'ianskaia's *A Story of Zoya and Shura* (Povest' o Zoie i Shure, 1953), V. Smirnov's *Zina Portnova* and many others.

¹⁷ Through radio signals, as we have seen in the Strugatskii's novel, or just through the awareness of the cosmonaut's accomplishment.

“atemporal” temporality of outer space evokes can be explained if we consider similarities between this temporality and the temporality in which the Communist state has to theoretically exist, a temporality “after” the final point of historical process, after the history stops, strikingly similar to the epic “Great Time” of the Soviet novel as Katerina Clark discusses it.¹⁸ It is, in a way, a space of radical alterity, the most appropriate “no-place”, u-topia, due to a temporality it is imagined (not) to possess.

The ideal, immutable, eternal symbol of the dead body in space becomes more than a beacon that signals the ideal (even as, or precisely because, it is dead) Soviet subjectivity to the rest of the state’s subjects and to the rest of the world. In a space that possesses what can be deemed a perversely ideal Communist temporality, the dead body serves as a constant reference to the ideal Soviet subject in the ideal Soviet space.

Post-Soviet Deconstruction of the Myth

All of the features of the corpus of fantasies about dead cosmonauts, namely: the fantasy’s potential of becoming a powerful symbol of the Soviet state’s accomplishment; the fantasy’s appeal to the desired ahistorical temporality that both Communism and outer space promise; the dead cosmonaut’s status as an ideal subject of the state that has to undergo an ultimate ordeal (death) to be installed as such; and the perverse nature of all of these that is manifested in the excess of the required sacrifice and the excess of the subjectivity that results¹⁹ – all of these become subject to deconstruction in post-Soviet literature and film. On the one hand, this deconstruction is a result of exposing the

¹⁸ Clark 40.

¹⁹ Though the dead body is of course devoid of “conventional” subjectivity, it is invested with a symbolic subjectivity that maintains an infinite existence.

mythological nature of the Communist grand narrative in the aftermath of *perestroika* and of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its structuring narratives.

On the other hand, film and fiction's very turn to this corpus of fantasies signifies that they still hold an imaginative potential as post-Soviet culture works with the Soviet material to create its own mythological content. Several important post-Soviet texts in the 1990s and 2000s turn to the fantasies of the dead cosmonauts, as it seems that for post-Soviet culture outer space holds another promise, predicated on the nostalgia for its Soviet value – of being a place where the concerns of the now-post-Soviet subjectivity can be examined.

Viktor Pelevin's *Omon Ra*: the Soviet Cosmos and its Discontents

Viktor Pelevin's short novel, *Omon Ra* (1991) reveals the structure of the fantasy that is formally similar, but ideologically strikingly different from what we have already seen in the Soviet texts; here, the fantasy's structure is exposed, not concealed,²⁰ which radically changes the "message" of the novel.

Sally Dalton-Brown contends that the text's main theme is (Soviet) propaganda and its exposure/deconstruction.²¹ This indeed seems to be the case, as the plot would suggest: a boy, Omon, dreams of becoming a cosmonaut; is able to join the Space Program; is instructed by his superiors that he needs to sacrifice his life for the sake of the mission's success; is getting ready to die because the details of the mission do not include the return of the cosmonauts (indeed, officially it is an automatic flight that does

²⁰ The novel's dedication supports the argument that the ideological fantasy in question is the same Soviet fantasy. *Omon Ra* is dedicated to the "heroes of the Soviet Cosmos" ("*geroiam sovetskogo kosmosa*"). The formulation demonstrates the dynamics of symbolic appropriation that structured the Space Race: the outer space here becomes a Soviet territory.

²¹ Sally Dalton-Brown, "Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair? Viktor Pelevin and Russian Postmodernist Prose Author(s)", in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 1997, Vol. 75, No.2, 216-233, 228.

not include any human space travelers at all); and finally goes to the Moon only to discover that the whole mission was an elaborate set-up and he had never left Earth. The Soviet space program turns out to be a simulation, an attempt to invent itself in order to be able to compete with the “enemy,” the USA, in the Space Race, all the while lacking financial and technological resources to do so.

As much as the text’s “message” is indeed the dismantling of the elaborate web of Soviet propaganda through a postmodernist deconstruction of ideological simulacra, it is nonetheless not its only focus. While the Soviet space program in the novel turns out to be a sham, the deaths of its participants, at least as far as the narrator can tell, are not being simulated: the cosmonauts have to die “for real,” in an uncanny post-Soviet reiteration of the heroic path of becoming “Real Men.” If the phantasmatic content of the myth of the Real Man is taken into account in the reading of the text, it becomes a novel that deals with “metaphysical and eternal concepts”²² even as it deconstructs the Soviet propaganda.

Omon Ra’s eponymous protagonist and narrator, Omon Krivomazov shares his dream of going to space with the flight school admission committee and is asked to join the cosmonaut squad in a “space school.” He is then explicitly asked to sacrifice his life for his country. He becomes a part of the lunar mission, but in a bizarre capacity: Omon is supposed to drive the lunar module that is touted as the achievement of Soviet space automatics. In the course of training, Omon learns that the Soviet automatics is nonexistent, and all the automatic systems, like intercontinental ballistic missiles and spaceships are in fact operated by humans, who are in the novel very appropriately called

²²As Sergei Kostyrko suggests in his early review of the novel. See Sergei Kostyrko, “Chistoie Pole Literaturny”, in *Novyi Mir*, 1992, 12, pp. 250-59. A similar opinion is expressed by S. Chuprinin, “Sbyvsheesia Nebyvshee”, *Znamia*, 1993, 9, p. 181-188.

“Real Men,” a designation that penetrates the actual content of the romanticized Soviet concept: operating a sustainer rocket engine in the novel invariably results in the death of the human who performs this task. Omon is required to die (to shoot himself, as there is no means of return to Earth), too, after he installs a transmitter broadcasting Soviet slogans on the lunar surface. The actual content of the mission of Strugatskiie’s space explorer is thus made explicit in Pelevin’s text, as Omon’s (eventually) dead body is precisely what will ensure the proper functioning of the symbol of the Soviet appropriation of outer space, the transmitter.

Omon Ra engages with the myth of “Real Men” by exposing the implications of what the hero of *How The Steel Was Tempered* is transformed into by the requirements imposed on his subjectivity by the state. Where Ostrovskii’s character became the ideal Soviet subject “despite” (or precisely because of, as Kaganovsky argues) his mutilation, in Pelevin’s novel the mutilation becomes an explicit, and officially sanctioned, prerequisite to being useful to the state. The text’s constant strategy is the schizophrenic literalizing and legitimizing of Soviet mythology’s most emotionally charged metaphors. When Omon, taking his first step on the way to space, enters the flight school (named after Aleksei Mares’iev), a high-ranking member of the admission committee speaks to the incoming class, saying that the class will not train to become just pilots in the school, but first and foremost – real men.²³ This sounds like just another lofty Soviet formula peppering the novel’s parody of the Party-sanctioned discourse– but only until after the meeting, when the class goes to the mess hall, where their food is spiked with sedatives; they wake up in the morning to find their feet amputated, to repeat Aleksei Mares’iev’s

²³ Viktor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. Trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996). This sentence is omitted in the Bromfield translation (31). Further quotations refer to this edition.

journey towards being the Soviet hero pilot in shockingly exact detail. Omon and his friend escape this fate because the state has another one in mind for them (for which they must yet remain able-bodied). Yet, Omon still has a chance to observe a graduate of the flight school at his final examination, consisting of performing the folk dance for the exam committee. The graduate passes with flying colors, which on the surface attests to the effectiveness of his transformation into a Real Man. However, while for Polevoi's Mares'iev, at least, dancing was a way to persuade the medical board to let him fly again, in the phantasmatic version of the Soviet Union constructed by Pelevin's novel, the performance is a means to its own end. The novel associates the Soviet State with the excess of ritualistic performativity: Omon learns that the graduate has never flown, nor would he ever fly, because this Soviet Union possesses only a couple of planes that patrol the border.

Further, on his way to the Moscow secret "cosmonaut school" Omon hears shots from afar; his driver explains that the shots come from the Aleksandr Matrosov infantry school. No further explanation is given, but, amputated feet still fresh in mind of Pelevin's reader familiar with Soviet heroic narratives, they can imagine that the cadets at the Matrosov school are trained to throw themselves on pill-boxes, blocking the machine-guns with their own bodies to allow their units to escape the fire, repeating the feat of historical Aleksandr Matrosov, another martyr in the Soviet war pantheon, during the Great Patriotic War.

Pavka Korchagin, too, appears in the text; attesting to the excess of the heroic feat that the state requires of him, he is split in two. Omon's two political instructors in the secret cosmonaut school are named Urchagin and Burchagin: these alliterative copies of

the first Real Man graduated, Omon learns, from the Pavel Korchagin School of Higher Political Education²⁴ that manufactures Pavkas on a large scale. The mass production of heroes, the reader is led to believe, works quite well for the ideological goals of the state in the novel's universe. Omon cannot help being inspired by the mechanically reproduced copies of Korchagin, whose everyday life is also a literal reproduction of the inspirational setup given in the Ostrovskii's novel:

I was amazed at the positive optimism of this man [Urchagin], blind, paralyzed, chained to a wheelchair, but nonetheless carrying out his duty and never tiring of life. [...] [He] would lie silent and motionless, propped up on his elbow on the bed in a tiny room on the fifth floor, wearing his uniform jacket and covered up to the waist with a blanket that hid the bedpan from probing eyes. The poor furnishings of the room – a map case for writing on, with narrow slits in the sheet of cardboard laid over it, a glass of strong tea permanently on the table, the white curtain and the rubber plant – all touched me so profoundly I almost wept, and at those moments I stopped thinking that all Communists were cunning, mean, and self-serving.²⁵

In this parallel universe of literalized metaphors, Omon is, to an extent, an outsider: he retains some degree of skepticism towards the symbolic excesses of the Soviet state. That he himself is ready to become one of the Real Men is inconsistent with

²⁴ This is omitted in the Bromfield translation.

²⁵ Pelevin (*Omon Ra*), 56. The Russian text is cited from: Pelevin, Viktor. *Omon Ra*. <<http://pelevin.nov.ru/romans/pe-omon/>>. Accessed Apr. 2, 2009. “Меня поражал оптимизм этого человека, слепого, парализованного, прикованного к инвалидному креслу - но выполняющего свой долг и не устающего радоваться жизни. [Он] молча и неподвижно полулежал в кровати в крохотной комнате пятого этажа - в кителе, до пояса прикрытый одеялом, скрывавшим от постороннего взгляда судно. Бедная обстановка комнаты, планшет для письма с узкими прорезями в накладываемой сверху картонке, неизменный стакан крепкого чая на столе, белая занавеска и фикус - все это трогало меня почти до слез, и в эти минуты я переставал думать, что все коммунисты - хитрые, подловатые и основательные люди”.

this skepticism. He manages to be, simultaneously, a dissident and an already-ideal, unquestioning Soviet subject. To see how Omon, in a feat of Orwellian doublethink, manages to reconcile his admiration for the simulacra of Korchagin with an understanding that the Communists are, in general, not very nice people, we need to examine the source of his surprising compliance with all and everything that the state requires of him.

Upon seeing the flight school cadets that have undergone the required “transformation,” Omon notices “how pale and unhealthy their faces were; they seemed to bear the imprint of long days of interminable torment, to have been recast in a fixed expression of readiness”²⁶ and recalls the Young Pioneer’s organization traditional greeting, “Always Ready!”. Where the Bromfield translation would have him say, “[I] realiz(ed) what frauds we’d been... loudly assuring ourselves... that we were always prepared”²⁷, in the Russian text he realizes, literally, “what it was that we were assuring ourselves and everybody else of when we shouted out, ‘Always ready!’” Omon does not think he was a fraud when he shouted the Young Pioneer’s greeting; on the contrary, he seems to have always known the “it” for which he formulaically and not entirely consciously claimed he was ready as a boy.

Omon is surprisingly compliant with all the requirements of his training, as well as with the necessity to eventually die. His emotions upon learning about the inner workings of the Space Program and the deceit that it is predicated upon are very subdued. He experiences very little shock when he is told he will need to die and, though the thought of dying does not please him at all, he still proceeds with his training. The key to

²⁶ Pelevin 34.

²⁷ Ibid.

the text lies in this lack of emotion that is best approached through examining the structure of narration.

The previously discussed Soviet space crews discovered the bodies of *other cosmonauts* to learn their ideological and moral lessons. Omon, on the other hand, is supposed to *become* this body; yet, he cannot become it, because he is also the narrator in the text, and his never-slipping first person subjective narration is already a proof that his story of being a Soviet cosmonaut and dying to become a hero will not end the way Socialist Realist formula would have it. Where the Socialist heroes are *retrospectively* heroic, Omon is only *potentially* so. To use Aleksandr Fadeev's *The Young Guard* as an example, Oleg Koshevoi and his friends go towards their ends without knowing them: they are ready to die for their Motherland, of course, but they do not know that they will, much less how or when. The ideological impact of the story, then, is achieved through the constant interplay of the reader's historical knowledge that the members of the Young Guard perished, and the narrative's own (seeming) unawareness that this will happen. The narrative perspective in *The Young Guard* belongs to the characters, with little to no didactic digressions on the part of the subdued omniscient narrator, who chooses to withhold his omniscience in respect of the young people's fate until the very last chapters of the novel.

In the case of *Omon Ra*, the mechanism is reversed: the Soviet ideology's unwillingness to conceal, in the novel's universe, its inner workings, ensures that Omon firmly believes that he is going to die as a result of his heroic feat (and, as we have seen, may actually want to, because of more "personal" reasons), yet he does not. Thus, he is hardly a Soviet hero in retrospect; he is able to become a pastiche of a Soviet hero

because he performs, in the course of his life, the actions that would *eventually* make him a hero in retrospect. This performance is conscious, or so the narrative logic would have it: Omon the narrator, already “omniscient,” selects the episodes in the life of his temporal Other, the younger Omon, doing what the narrator of *The Young Guard* did when he selected the episodes of Oleg Koshevoi’s childhood that pointed towards dormant heroism. However, because these two Omons pretend to be one and the same for the reader, the structural elements of the heroic narrative lack a critical distance from which they can be observed (which Fadeev-the-narrator’s position in relation to the Young Guard allowed).

In this way, Omon spends the novel preparing to become a dead cosmonaut, a symbol of the Soviet achievement in space, while it is quite obvious that he will live, as he is still able to narrate. The tension between what we are led to believe by the formulaic nature of the narrative (which in its conceptual structure repeats the Soviet *Bildungsroman*) and Omon’s narratorial position makes proper functioning of such a narrative impossible. In other words, Omon cannot be living and telling the story within the context of the Soviet formula, though all of the structural elements of the formula are present. The narrative perspective, then, lends a sort of retroactive logic to the narration; the narrator’s present, his status as a cosmonaut who stayed alive, shapes all the previous events of his life.

The novel starts with outlining the steps through which Omon’s childhood dream of going into space crystallizes. At the outset, the account pretends to be just another Soviet *Bildungsroman*: Omon begins by reminiscing about his formative years, and the somewhat clichéd style of reflection deceptively structures the beginning of the novel as

a (slightly more lyrical than usual) story about the Soviet boy who wants to become a cosmonaut. However, upon closer examination, Omon's account of his childhood dream turns out to be very inconsistent with the standard Soviet model of such accounts.

Consider, for example, Viktor Dragunskii's *Deniskiny Rasskazy* ("Deniska's Stories") from the early 1960s,²⁸ narrated from the perspective of a little boy, Deniska, who describes how his dream to become a cosmonaut came into existence. Deniska hears about the Nikolaiev-Popovich first group flight²⁹ on the radio, sees the elation of his parents and other adults (who are so happy that they let Deniska's pranks go unpunished), and is especially excited about the cosmonauts' romantic call signs, Sokol ("Falcon") and Berkut ("Golden Eagle"), which he and his best friend immediately adopt in their play.

Significantly, it is the heavily theatrical and heroic setup, together with validation from adults and "such pretty call signs!" that prompt Deniska and his friend to start dreaming of becoming cosmonauts (they even build a "rocket ship" in the playground and "launch" it). Even more significantly, to prepare for their careers they decide, before they are accepted to the "cosmonaut school" (which is not going to happen for quite some time - they are eight years old), to "condition themselves like steel", a pun on the title of Ostrovskii's novel introduced in the song from the Stalinist film *Vratar'* (*The Goalkeeper*, 1937). The song, *Sportivnyi Marsh* ("Sports March"), encourages to "temper yourself like steel" in order for body and soul to remain "young." Deniska and his friend, inspired "not to be afraid of heat or cold," take the song's recommendation at face value: they begin taking cold showers and fall ill, promptly taking the first step on the sacrificial way of the Soviet Real Man.

²⁸ See Viktor Dragunskii, *The Adventures of Dennis*. Trans. Fainna Glagoleva (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1981).

²⁹ On August 11, 1962.

While Deniska and his friend acquire their dream through paternal validation and acutely, if not totally consciously, feel the need to transform themselves, symbolically as well as physically, into “Real Men” to become cosmonauts, *Omon Ra* subverts not only the content, but also the structure of the Soviet *Bildungsroman* by laying bare the death drive that underlies the Soviet heroic narrative.

Peter Brooks, in his application of Sigmund Freud’s theory of death drive to narrative dynamics, argues that the narrative desire, the desire of reading is a desire for the end, reached through the detour of the plot of narrative.³⁰ Brooks argues that this consideration ensures the sort of anticipatory logic that the narratives must follow:

The sense of a beginning, then, must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending. We might say that we are able to read present moments—in literature and, by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot.³¹

Brooks mentions the “retrospective knowledge”³² that the narrative seeks, which is precisely the knowledge with which the older, wiser Omon the narrator invests the events of his previous life. The narrative’s desire for its own death, then, is too realized in retrospect; in the case of *Omon Ra*, it is the retrospection that makes apparent the content of Omon’s dream to go to space. As a boy, even as Omon thinks about space, he never imagines any detail of his *own* experience in the space beyond liftoff, and this moment of

³⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 52 and 104.

³¹ Brooks 1984, 94.

³² Brooks 1984, 95.

symbolic crossing of a threshold marks the death of the dream's narrative, the actual end of the dream.

Luckily, for the time being the state's desire to make a Real Man out of Omon coincides with Omon's own desire to belong in space by radically changing his plane of existence: both acts require a death, if not physical, then at least symbolic. Katerina Clark suggests that all Stalinist novels involve

some kind of death [as a formal] element in the traditional rite of passage [...] because death is involved not only in the preparatory or liminal phase of the rite [of passage] but also in the moment of passage itself. [...] When the hero sheds his individualistic self at the moment of passage, he dies as an individual and is reborn as a function of the collective³³

Though *Omon Ra* is not an outright pastiche of a Stalinist novel, it nevertheless makes visible the inner structures of Socialist Realist heroic narrative which more often than not *does* "kill" its heroes to fix them forever in their heroic capacity.

Furthermore, laying bare the requirements for the Soviet brand of heroism, *Omon Ra* tackles the source of the subject's compliance with the demands of the State, finding it in the State's eagerness to utilize its subjects' death drive to its own ends. In the ideal Soviet heroic narrative, the State would "read" Omon's desire and single him out as a potential (dead) hero; Omon would comply with the requirement because that would be exactly what he would have wanted all along. Indeed, this is what the admission committee does when they accept Omon into flight school: the committee member listens to the story about a spaceship model with no door inside (so that cosmonauts cannot escape) and, precisely because Omon chooses to tell *this* story to explain why he wants to

³³ Clark 178.

be a cosmonaut, interprets it as an early indication of his capability of becoming a Real Man, i.e., an already-dead hero.

According to Peter Brooks, though narratives long for their ends, the circuitous path towards that end, a function of the Freudian pleasure principle, is nevertheless imperative for the proper functioning of a narrative. There is no possibility for such a circuitous path in Omon's case because this path is made hyper-linear by the will of the state. Yet the balance between the death drive and the pleasure principle tips towards the latter when Omon discovers that his desire to be a "heavenly body," i.e., to belong in space, is betrayed by the space itself.

The (outer) space where Omon's death drive and the state's desire for dead subjects were supposed to be perfectly aligned turns out to be structurally inappropriate to make the Real Man myth happen. The "outer space" where Omon (supposedly) goes, in short, fails to live up to his expectations. The vast sublime void of outer space that Omon dreamed about earlier in the novel turns out to be a very ordinary, mundane place: "I was on the moon. But I had no feelings about the fact at all; I was wondering how to put back the chain that had slipped off the cog wheel"³⁴. The metaphors that he is able to find for his experience are, again, far from lofty: he says that the Earth seen from space resembles is a large school globe. Where Socialist Realist narrative would over-utilize pathetic fallacy for properly structuring the space where the feat is to be performed (thunderstorms, severe frost and wind all abound in the episodes of heroic deaths in the

³⁴ Pelevin 121.

stories of Pioneer heroes, for example),³⁵ in *Omon Ra* the heroic feat is supposed to happen in a “narrow, black, stuffy space”³⁶ of the lunar module.

The state, in other words, in its already-much-exhibited carelessness, fails to make the heroic space happen, as Omon comes to realize in the very end of the novel when it becomes apparent that he in fact never left Earth. The sublime vastness of the cosmos turns out to be an ideological construction put in place to become the object of desire for the eager potential hero, Omon. The state, then, preys on Omon’s fantasy, but, in accordance with the general logic of the parallel universe where the events of the novel take place, the state never conceals that the space for heroism is far from sublime.

The phantasmatic Soviet state of the novel promptly puts every ideologically relevant signified in place: it sets up the training school, it kills off the operators of sustainer rocket engine; in a perverse nod to the didacticism of the figure of a dead cosmonaut in the Socialist science fiction, it even conveniently provides the bodies of the former “space crews” on the “Moon” for Omon to discover in the course of his mission. Yet, the state fails to provide the signified that would justify the core of ideological meanings that it expects to produce out of Omon’s death: it fails to provide outer space itself. In other words, the sublime void of outer space that technically should “be there” for the proper Soviet hero to uncover the ideological meanings associated with this

³⁵ There seem to be two main modes of using pathetic fallacy in the stories of young Soviet martyrs: in *Povest o Zoie i Schure* by Luybov Kosmodem’ianskaia, the morning of the young woman’s hanging by the Nazis is accompanied by a severe frost the likes of which the villagers cannot recall; lightning flashes consecutively on the faces of each member of the Young Guard in the scene of their execution in the cinematic adaptation of the Fadeev novel; on the other hand, in Lev Kassil’s *Younger Son’s Street*, the morning of the boy’s death is the most beautiful morning, peaceful and bright, which contradicts the tragedy, yet signifies that this death is not in vain because the boy’s heroism in the Crimean resistance enables the defeat of the Nazis and thus restores the much-longed-for peace in his hometown.

³⁶ Pelevin 123.

sublimity (those of ideological appropriation and the sublime post-historicity of Communism), is not there.

In the end of the novel, Omon exits the module only to discover that he is in the Moscow Underground. Instead of the “above” of outer space, he is literally “below.” The novel leaves him as he tries to figure out where he needs to go from there. By making the “heroic” narrative open-ended, the text performs the final stage of this narrative’s deconstruction, denying it its limit. Furthermore, that outer space itself turns out to be not just unreachable, but also, for all practical purposes, non-existent, signifies the failure of the ideological fantasy of the cosmos to sustain its impact on the Soviet subject as the subject learns that the cosmos is just that – the fantasy, with no physical referent. Omon’s heroic feat, then, is not properly structured not just because the heroic narrative’s conventionally linear structure fails due to his ambivalent position as an undead hero-narrator. Also, the space where the finiteness (death) of the narrative has to happen with maximum ideological impact is, in the novel’s universe, non-existent. The fantasy has gone too far in ripping the signifiers from their signifieds, and it seems that even in Omon’s unmistakably postmodern subjectivity the connection should be maintained.

Does this mean that the Soviet myth of space exploration is dead? It certainly seems to be the case as the novel exposes the sacrificial nature of Soviet heroism and the carelessness of the state in sustaining the fantasy. Yet, Omon is no victim: his status as a cosmonaut who survived makes him “own” his death drive. In one episode, Omon recalls the slogan on the wall of his training hall, which says “Life always has room for heroism.” He theorizes that

It was not just romantic nonsense but a precise and sober statement of the fact that our Soviet life is not the ultimate instance of reality but only, as it were, its anteroom. I imagined it this way: there is no space anywhere in America, between the glaring shop window and the parked Cadillac, for heroism, and there can be no space for it – apart, of course, from that rare moment when a Soviet spy passes by³⁷.

Omon theorizes space's potential for acquiring ideologically relevant meanings in a way that is surprisingly similar to the conventional Soviet heroic narrative. The presence of a hero is supposed to transform the space in which he performs his feat; this is why in the formulaic heroic narrative, nature eagerly provides extreme weather to echo the executions of Soviet heroes. In the mock-Socialist-Realist universe of *Omon Ra* any and every one of the mass-produced and nameless heroes is expected to have the “special powers” to transform the world around them.

While rejecting the notion of the dead hero, the novel does not deny the notion of Romantic heroism altogether, as Omon possesses these “special powers” even as he realizes that he is creating an illusion. As Omon's younger self cannot help but admire his political instructor, as this younger Omon convinces himself that he is in space during the “flight,” we recall an early episode from Omon's childhood, carefully placed by the older Omon-the-narrator in the beginning of the narrative. In this episode, the boy Omon was able to imagine that he flew a plane, surprised at how convincing the illusion was. The mock-Soviet state did not provide Omon with the object of his desire, outer space, yet Omon did not need it because he had it all along. In his childhood, he was able see outer

³⁷ Pelevin (*Omon Ra*), 61.

space amidst the bleak Soviet landscape, even if (and even as) he realized it was an illusion.

The fetishist's simultaneous "knowing" and "not knowing" underlies the novel's reflection on the Soviet symbolic legacy: *Omon Ra* borrows the framework of the Communist sublime ideological fantasy, and on this framework builds another one. While the Soviet fantasy of space ceased to function properly for Omon, Omon's ability to transform the space around him recovers some measure of authenticity to the notion of [Soviet] heroism. In a nostalgic move, the novel borrows the sublimity of the Soviet subject's experience in space to redeem the notion of heroism that is stripped of its ideological underpinnings, leaving only its Romantic core. Omon did not go to space, but he did not need to: he was there all along, as the unmoving, atemporal, tempting and frightening outer space comes to metaphorize the post-Soviet nostalgic object, the Soviet Union. As Omon sees himself in space while surrounded by the garbage cans of a Soviet courtyard, the swarm of deconstructionist and satirical moves in the novel conceals its return to traditional Russian cultural concerns in an attempt to find a metaphor for the Soviet experience that does not rely on ideology.

**Aleksei Fedorchenko's *First on the Moon*: Resurrecting the Dead
Cosmonauts.**

Aleksei Fedorchenko's 2004 film, *First on the Moon*, follows *Omon Ra* in carving out a post-Soviet niche for the Soviet myth of the conquest of space. The film introduces

Russia to the first full-fledged incarnation of the mockumentary genre³⁸ by narrating the “secret history” of the Soviet space program in the late 1930s.

Exploring the post-Soviet tension between the nostalgic and the critical representation of Soviet history, the film inverts a familiar negative mechanism of conspiracy theories associated with Space Race. Where the “flapping” flag in the Apollo 11 moon landing footage has become “proof” that the mission never landed on Moon,³⁹ *First on the Moon* demonstrates, with the same degree of conspiratorial conviction, filmed evidence of the fact that Russians *were* on the Moon as early as 1938, in a playful nod to the Cold War cultural dynamics. The film explicitly does what the American conspiracy theorists claim was done in respect of the Apollo landing: it fakes documentary footage to create a historical event, and the explicitness of deconstruction becomes for the film a source of reclaiming and reconstructing history.

³⁸ Aleksander Prokhorov, in his review of the film, traces the experiments of the nascent mockumentary genre in post-Soviet cinema, but posits *First on the Moon* to be the first production that consistently fits into the genre scheme. Prokhorov argues that mockumentary is an exceptionally productive genre to close the “gap between Soviet reality and its representation in Soviet culture”. See Aleksander Prokhorov, “The Redemption of Lunar Reality: Aleksei Fedorchenko’s *First on the Moon* (Pervye na lune)”, 2005. Kino-Kultura 2006: 11. <<http://www.kinokultura.com/2006/11r-firstmoon2.shtml>>, accessed May 29, 2009. To extrapolate from Prokhorov’s argument, mockumentary uses the representational techniques conventionally associated with “telling the truth” for dealing with fictional subjects. Thus, the gap between “fact” and “fiction” is formally exposed because the fictional subject matter of the film is presented as objectively verifiable. In the post-Soviet cultural context, permeated with the remnants of Soviet signifiers that have proved to be empty, such representational mode, paradoxically, can potentially become a functional model of working through the past, because it ironically, yet compulsively uses the same techniques of fictionalizing social reality that were used (with little irony in mind) in creating Soviet master narrative. As a result, the constant awareness of the fictional nature of the object of representation (i.e., historical event) ensures that the mockumentary functions just like this narrative, with limited connection to social reality. In other words, the mockumentary’s mode of treating the event is very similar to the mode in which the Soviet official discourse is perceived, in the post-Soviet context, to have treated Soviet social reality. That is, by using representational politics of the mockumentary genre, the film, on one level, examines the creation of the Soviet myth, but, by the very fact of this examination, it conceptually solidifies it, by consciously narrating it *as a myth*, which enables the film to find a “proper place” for the important part of the Soviet grand narrative (i.e., Space Race) in the post-Soviet context. That it does so by ironically deconstructing the past is in fact a nostalgic move; the nostalgia here is not for the lost culture, but for the lost modality of representation.

³⁹ Several reviews explicitly compare and contrast *First on the Moon* with *Capricorn One*.

Further, *First on the Moon* blends nostalgia for the time when the Space Program was a source of national pride and the hardly nostalgic representation of the grotesque atmosphere of the Soviet cultural milieu that brought the myth into existence. This ambivalence of assessment of Soviet history prompted early domestic reviews of film to be obviously confused as to what exactly it “says.” An anonymous online reviewer muses, “Unfortunately, just the post-Soviet viewer and a handful of Western intellectuals can get wild about the film.”⁴⁰ Indeed, the representation of the Soviet space program in the film is conceptually strikingly similar to that of *Omon Ra*, just as the program itself is equally phantasmatic.⁴¹

Fedorchenko happily shares in his interviews the great lengths to which his crew went locating and obtaining the unused caches of older film to give the footage an “authentic” feel. Pretending to be a journalistic investigation (a documentary genre that swelled on Russian television in the 1990s), the film “locates” and “interviews” the surviving “witnesses.”

⁴⁰ Anonymous review of *First on the Moon*, 2004:

<http://project.insysltd.ru/pls/ivan/movies.htm?action=1&value=5&p_value2=3782>, accessed May 29, 2009: “К сожалению, реально протащиться от фильма может только постсоветский зритель и горстка западных интеллектуалов”.

⁴¹ The motives of appropriation of space, simulation, and death (readily observed in *Omon Ra*) re-emerge in *First on the Moon*’s treatment of Space Program. Thus, the repetitive clips literally show simulation of the cosmonauts’ training in flight simulators. Just as we have seen in *Omon Ra*, this simulation dangerously borders reality: in an episode where the cosmonauts are shown to train in rarefied atmosphere, the technician acts as flight controller and his commands follow liftoff and landing routines; meanwhile, the cosmonauts, progressively less and less conscious, are shown sitting in a crude simulator that looks like a shed. What the film seemingly shows is just that space training does require some amount of physical discomfort, which the offscreen commentary cheerfully asserts. However, in a move that the film would repeatedly use, that of mismatched soundtrack and visuals, the cheerfulness of the commentary that immediately follows the clip is undermined by the camera’s lingering on the faces of visibly suffering cosmonauts and later on their unconscious bodies. The footage being shown comes, we are lead to believe, from several surveillance cameras in the training module, all looking at the crew from different angles and differently zoomed, yet footage from these different cameras is edited into one sequence, which nearly eliminates the “documentary” feel of the sequence. Instead, it strikes the viewer as camerawork characteristic for the narrative cinema, where camera pans and close-ups tell a story, in this case – of bodily suffering.

The mission of the first Soviet cosmonauts, according to the investigation, is in line with the rest of unmistakably utopian aspirations of Stalinist Russia: the program shoots right for the Moon, skipping the human orbit flight and much of the animal testing. The launch is scheduled for March 16, 1938. Upon failure of the mission several minutes into launch, the program is quickly wrapped up, the chief engineer disappears, the substitute members of the crew are assassinated, and the cosmonaut Ivan Kharlamov is presumed lost. However, he resurfaces, badly injured, with brain damage that allegedly prevents him from “telling the story.” Ivan, then, the logic of the investigation suggests, manages to return from space under undisclosed circumstances and travel back to Russia.

However, due to the mission’s failure, the state does not appear to need Ivan alive, and, repressive psychiatry always in the background of the film, he is institutionalized so that the possible tales of his space journey can be officially construed as a delusion of a madman. Ivan’s cosmonaut training was allegedly rigorously documented on video by the NKVD (the KGB’s predecessor); the constant surveillance, to which nearly every aspect of the cosmonaut’s life is subjected, installs Ivan as, literally, the subject of the state(’s total observation). In the end, Ivan, like Pelevin’s protagonist, Omon, is able to escape the Soviet panopticon: his later life, we are told, is officially a mystery.⁴² Even as he “dies” officially, on the visual level, Kharlamov is “dead” even earlier, before the launch, as his immobile body, eyes closed, is loaded into the spacecraft. This is very appropriate: after all, he is about to become a Soviet hero.

⁴² Though we manage to get a glimpse of Kharlamov’s later years and find out that he, in a way, did become a hero, and very “Russian” at that. He performs in the circus under the stage name, Aleksandr Nevskii, historical Prince Aleksandr Nevskii (13th century) being perhaps one of the least disputably heroic figures in early Russian history. Thus Kharlamov metonymically partakes in the glory of the “Russia’s Sun”, “*solntse zemli russkoi*”, as the chronicle calls Aleksandr.

This brings us to the reemergence of the motif of “Real Men” in the film. The film already treats the production of the ideal Soviet subject as a distinct part of the Soviet mythology (together with associated symbolic structures and images). Furthermore, the impression that the Real Men for this 2004 film are already something firmly associated with the imaginary Soviet cultural landscape arises from the film’s surprisingly analytical (and ambivalent) treatment of the topic. While *First on the Moon*’s whole representational premise is predicated on the ambivalence of historical interpretation, the film seems to be especially uneasy with the issue of producing the Soviet subject, simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by it, thus translating the “pleasure-pain” that is at the core of the myth of the Real Man into its own representational politics, which the surviving member of the cosmonaut squad sums up, reminiscing: “All this training, all these G-forces, twelve hours a day... Hard... Nice.”⁴³

However, while the film has been called “a thoughtful look at the casual brutality of Stalinist Russia,”⁴⁴ the subjects of this brutality, in an already familiar move that the “documentary” format easily allows, many years after the events claim to have enjoyed this brutality quite a bit, while the look on their faces in the “documentary footage” attests to the contrary. When Fedorchenko says in an interview that he made a film about “the titans of spirit,” he is pinpointing the nature of the problem: the Communist heroes, though beautified by the temporal distance and nostalgia, are disembodied, to remain forever as a cinematic illusion.

⁴³ Thus, many playful jabs at the symbology associated with the ideological descendants of Pavka Korchagin are readily observed in the film. The Soviet cultural milieu of the film is peppered with blacksmiths who can still work, injured, even after the machinery they operate gives up. In a satirical extrapolation from the popular song of the Stalin era, the *Aviators’ March*, where the aviators acquire arms of steel to be used as wings and a “fiery engine” for a heart, the film introduces in the exposition a footage of a fascinating (and fantastic) project of replacing the bony skeleton of humans by a metallic one

⁴⁴ IIFF 2007: *First on the Moon* review, Jun 1, 2007: <<http://twitchfilm.net/archives/010243.htm>>, accessed May 29, 2009.

The opening shot of the film establishes the modality of representation that the rest of the film would follow. After the title, the long shot of what appears to be a lunar landscape, together with craters and mysterious geologic formations, turns out to be a close-up of the ground that is being dug by a spade as the camera zooms out. What is being shown is not what it seems but rather is what the camera made it look like, the opening shot suggests. A legitimate question then remains: why does the fantasy of outer space become so conceptually productive for mourning (and recreating) the Soviet utopia in the post-Soviet culture even as it is explicitly posited to be fake? Fedorchenko himself believes that “the Moon is not a goal, but just a motive, just a pretext [to show] that the film really is about real heroes, titans, strong, smart, honest people, who, for their Motherland, are expendable.”⁴⁵ As much as this reading is perfectly valid, it still has to be said that the Moon (and outer space in general) for post-Soviet culture is not just the pretext to nostalgically muse about the past Soviet glory, but an outright starting premise of such musings; the cosmos as a conceptual space is a premise that holds enormous signification potential.

As mentioned earlier, outer space in Soviet mythology is associated with utopian meanings, both experiential and ideological; yet, this utopia tends to turn into a dystopia, because of the inherent ambivalence of conceptualizing the cosmos as the sublime. Outer space thus holds a potential for exploring the tension between the positive and negative readings of Soviet (utopian) mythology, allowing to mythologize and demythologize, “utopianize” and “dystopianize” the Soviet culture.

⁴⁵ “Pravda” review, <<http://www.pravda.ru/world/europe/52114-luna-0.28.09.2005>>: “На самом деле, этот фильм о том, как настоящие герои, титаны, сильные, умные, честные люди, оказываются расходным материалом для своей Родины. Луна в фильме, конечно, не цель, а лишь мотив, средство”.

Where in *Omon Ra* the protagonist never left Earth, thus being denied the “real” signified of the sublime Soviet heroic narrative, in *First on the Moon* the situation is problematized further. The final sequence of the film is footage that, we are led to believe, comes from a camera mounted on the visor of Ivan Kharlamov’s spacesuit helmet, having magically survived the catastrophe. Notwithstanding the fact that we have already seen a lunar landscape that proved to be fake in the opening shots of the film, in this sequence the viewer is sutured with Kharlamov. Kharlamov, battered by his flight experience, muted by his head trauma and by Soviet forced psychiatry, we are told earlier, was desperately trying to get healthy, to be able to “tell the story.” However, we are left wondering about the circumstances of his incident until the final sequence, which does what Kharlamov could not: it does tell, in the first and only instance of suture with the character occurring in the film, that Russians were on the Moon in the year 1938. This formal suture uses the power of cinematic identification even as it has exposed the inner workings of the cinematic apparatus many times in course of the film, not to cathartically return to the “belief in make-believe,” but to create an interpretative moment that Tsvetan Todorov describes in his theory of the fantastic:

In a world [that] we know....there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination - and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality--but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us... The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty....[it] is that hesitation experienced by a

person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event [*italics mine*. – DK].⁴⁶

The film holds the viewer within this uncertainty for its whole duration, constantly contradicting itself both in respect to its “historicity” and the ability of cinema to represent history. In a way, this allows the film to keep the interpretative field open, without the necessity to assign one single reading to Soviet history. It is possible to argue that, no matter how aware the film is of the Soviet grand narrative being a myth, the film’s nostalgia for Soviet mythology prompts it to create its own. At the first glance, it is evident that verifiability of every event in the film is consistently, though not always explicitly, questioned if not outright denied. Thus, the film stresses the unavailability of many “witnesses” who mysteriously “vanish” in another euphemism describing Stalinist purges; those “witnesses” who *are* available insist that they do not remember a thing. The phrase, “there was nothing” (*nichego ne bylo*) repeats as a compulsive refrain in the part of the film narrating the aftermath of the launch. Yet, after proclaiming that, in the absence of witnesses, it might even seem that “there was no such era” (literally, “no such time,” *kazhetsia, chto i vremeni togo ne bylo*), the narrator pauses and dreamily says, “But the rocket – it was there” (*a raketa - byla*), squeezing the whole narrative of the Soviet achievement into one exceptionally appropriate symbol (earlier in the film the rocket was described being “higher than Kremlin towers,” thus, in an allegorical reading, something above and beyond the symbol of the state and ideology).

In an interview, Fedorchenko shares an emotional experience he had at one of the film’s screenings: he tells about being approached by “one man” and being told that “it

⁴⁶Tzvetan Todorov, Trans. Richard Howard, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973), 25.

(the events in the film) was really so, and everything very closely resembles the truth. Not factually, but we managed to portray the spirit. This was the man who operated the lunar rover [this likely refers to the *Lunokhod 1* mission of 1970. – DK] from Earth... This was the greatest praise I could have received.”⁴⁷ The readily observable inconsistency between “it being really so” and “closely resembling the truth” in fact mimics the problematic relationship to mimesis that is built into the mockumentary genre. The film sums up its supposed relationship to the issue of historical representation through the voice of an archive worker, who says, guiding the “journalists” through the dusty labyrinth of secret KGB archives: “Everything that happened must be filmed. And if it was filmed, then it happened,”⁴⁸ which cannot help but sound like a perverse conclusion the film makes out of the Barthesian “on the one hand, it [the object in a photograph] is not there, on the other, it has indeed been.”⁴⁹

First on the Moon self-consciously does not do a good job pretending to be a documentary feature. The title sequence has opening credits that clearly show that the film has a cast; yet, none of the actors engaged in the film are on the Russian A-list, which ensures that the face recognition effect does not interfere with the suspension of disbelief that the film attempts to create. The narration varies between non-diegetic voiceover (most of the film) and diegetic voiceover, in some scenes where the narrator acts as the journalist interviewing the witnesses. The authority of the non-diegetic voiceover ensures proper framing of the illusion of mimesis, as, before any “action” starts

⁴⁷ The “Pravda” review, <<http://www.pravda.ru/world/europe/52114-luna-0.28.09.2005>>: “На меня большое впечатление произвел один человек, который подошел ко мне и сказал, что действительно всё так и было и все очень похоже на правду. Не фактически, но мы передали тот дух. Это был человек, который управлял с Земли Луноходом. Вся грудь в орденах, пожилой. Для меня это была высшая похвала”.

⁴⁸ In Russian: “Все, что было, должно быть снято. А если снято, значит, было”.

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: MacMillan (Hill and Wang), 1982), 115.

in the film, it already apologizes for the quality of the archival footage used in the film that is “not up to the standard” but is still used because of its “uniqueness.” There will be many more such apologetic revelations in the film that in fact does, albeit ironically, the same thing as Pelevin’s protagonist, Omon, saw the Soviet Space Program’s staff cinematographers do when making fake footage of the space walk, with similar revealingly apologetic remarks.

The argument of many cinema theorists who examine what happens to the issue of representing history in the postmodern cinema is that in postmodernity, history gets reinterpreted as an “experience” rather than as a chain of events. To that end, Vivian Sobchack discusses the representational immediacy of twentieth century technologies that, in terms of history, creates a possibility of attaching another dimension to the historical events that are traditionally presented in the form of linear (and, importantly, verbal) narratives. This representational immediacy, beside enabling one to think of history in terms of experience, has a very interesting implication for the whole structure of historical process as conceived by the film viewer: “By virtue of their increasing representational immediacy, these new twentieth century technologies of representation and narration (most significantly television) have increasingly collapsed the temporal distance between present, past, and future that structured out previously conceived notions of what we call history.”⁵⁰ The visual experience of history in *First on the Moon* is created out of the uncannily Eisensteinian montage through metonymic associations, where the footage of cosmonauts’ training is complemented by the equally fake footage of Young Pioneers’ outings and of everyday life in the Russia of 1937, where people

⁵⁰ Vivian Sobchack, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*. (Routledge, 1995), 4-5.

stroll in the parks, buy newspapers, eat ice cream and so forth. Another reviewer tackles precisely that, saying that

[i]t is not the plot that makes his film stunning, but the subtlety with which each fragment of the action conveys not just the historical time, but also its refined gradations, all of which are totally clear to [Fedorchenko's] contemporaries and to every Soviet person. Every decade has its own colors, odors, nuances, and between its beginning and its end there is an historical abyss.⁵¹

The “purposelessness” of the archival footage then becomes not just the function of the film’s critique of national history, realized through showing the obsessive desire on the part of the Soviet state to put itself in control of the events by filming and thus appropriating them. It also becomes a work of memorialization, an attempt to capture the experience of history, to bridge the “historical abyss”, for which documentary footage seemingly has great potential.

Surveillance footage, by definition, is presumed to represent the event as objectively as possible, because the camera in such footage is, literally and figuratively, disembodied, often immobile, capturing the events that happen to cross its scope. The arguably most famous piece of documentary footage in the XX-century, the Zapruder film showing Kennedy’s assassination, for the theorists of the documentary has become a perfect example of the documentary’s ability to simultaneously show and not show what “really” happened⁵² (it does show the moment of assassination yet fails to provide any

⁵¹ The Kovalyov review, <<http://www.kinokultura.com/2006/11r-firstmoon1.shtml>>.

⁵² For a discussion of the Zapruder film, see Marita Sturken, “Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone's Docudramas”, in *History and Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Theme Issue 36: Producing the Past: Making Histories Inside and Outside the Academy (Dec., 1997), 64-79. Also, Robert Kolker pays attention to the issue in his chapter on Oliver Stone’s cinema, in Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

answers as far as to who might have done it). The Zapruder film compromises the belief in the possibility of “objective” historical representation, yet it continues to be viewed because the belief that documentary footage is *the* representation of historical events is too temptingly ensured by the workings of the cinematic apparatus to be completely abandoned.

Such is the nostalgic desire on the part of *First on the Moon* for the camera to be able to be the objective, dispassionate recorder of the truth, that the film fakes the surveillance footage of the cosmonauts’ road to the Moon because it wants such footage to really have existed. The film creates a fetish out of the surveillance footage, knowing perfectly well that it is not “it,” not the objective representation of events, and yet so temptingly close.

First on the Moon, then, crafts a peculiar place from which it can look at the Soviet mythology from a distance, temporal as well as interpretative. As *First on the Moon* painstakingly recreates and mythologizes its perfect nostalgic object – the past that never existed, it uncovers the Soviet utopia that allowed the myth of the conquest of Cosmos to appear, and uses the model verbatim to salvage the remnants of Soviet mythology.

Aleksei Gherman’s *Paper Soldier*, the Last Cosmonaut

Post-Soviet culture’s fascination with all things cosmic is evident in that it does not seem to leave alone the corpus of myths surrounding the Soviet Space Program. In 2008, Aleksei German’s *Paper Soldier* presented a fictionalized account of the Bondarenko accident. This account serves in the film as the background to the story of a physician who monitors the cosmonaut squad’s training. The physician, Daniil, once

wanted to become a cosmonaut himself, but due to medical issues is left to participate only in ground operations. Daniil spends time worrying about “young boys who we send towards sure death,” and is still dreaming about “us going to the place where there was only God before.”

Daniil witnesses the oxygen chamber incident, fails to save the burned young man and plunges into the depths of depression, together with hallucinations of his dead parents who are calling him to join them in heaven. Daniil’s ambivalence about the space program is mirrored by his love life as he is torn between his wife and his lover, and his health becomes progressively worse. In the film’s climax, the two women watch Daniil fall off his bicycle and die of a heart attack as the launch of the rocket (which, we are lead to believe, carries Yuri Gagarin) is visible over the rural landscape, followed to the heavens by the camera’s languid movement. Daniil is reunited with his parents in heaven (which looks very much like a nostalgic recreation of the iconic messy coziness of a Soviet apartment of the 1960s-70s) where the rocket “carried” him.

Daniil’s failure and simultaneous triumph is summed up in the iconic voice of the 1960s Soviet generation, Bulat Okudzhava: “He wanted to change the world/So that everyone could be happy,/But he himself was hanging by a thread,/For he was a paper soldier.”⁵³ Even as the ‘thread’ of ideology seems to hold the cosmonauts-in-training firmly in place as they prepare for the first human spaceflight, Daniil is able to sever this thread as the film metaphorically takes him where he wanted to be.

In the film, the familiar motifs of ‘iron men,’ who created the Soviet state and desire to appropriate outer space (‘our men will go to the stars, and we’re going to build a *huge* base on Mars’, goes the staunch prognosis) run along the equally familiar themes of

⁵³Okudzhava 1989, 45.

outer space as a source of transcendent, utopian meanings yet also of fear and uncertainty ('all sorrows will be gone when we get there,' promises one of the characters, but the Space program is called 'a difficult and poignant step'). Yet, these themes only serve as a frame to the faithfully nostalgic recreation of the Soviet cultural landscape. The notoriously slow-moving camera lingers on objects of everyday life, leaving the 'likeable, but *pointless*' characters (Daniil's self-designation) to converse off-screen. The events of the film unfold against landscapes that lack color and seem to consist of puddles, broken tree branches and patches of mud, which is reminiscent of the ways the late 1980s Russian *chernukha* films set up their narrative space, contributing to the impression that the film does not truly belong in the year 2008 when it was made.

The opening sequence, with soldiers walking through the Kazakh steppe and the rocket being transported to the launch site, looks like a dream because of the camera's slow, slightly wobbly movement constantly changing elevation. Indeed, when we encounter the protagonist, he wakes up, yet the dream continues on the visual level because the technique does not change. Furthermore, Daniil is shown waking up so often in the film that the viewer is left wondering whether the preceding sequence was not also a dream sequence.

Thus, in the film, the faithfully recreated Soviet urban milieu and landscapes are formally and authoritatively posited as dreams. The film's vision offers the fleeting and "unreal" dream that the Soviet Union of the 1960s must indeed look like from the nostalgic post-Soviet vantage point. This vision taps into the nature of nostalgia as a longing for the place and time that never existed. However, the same cinematic technique allows for a different reading: the camerawork creates the disembodied, nearly

disinterested point of view that is, in a way, akin to the “objectiveness” of the “documentary” footage of *First on the Moon*. The gaze of the camera in the film is largely depersonalized as the camera looks at the space from unusual angles, its motions fluidly slow, not allowing itself to adopt the perspective of any of the characters. The viewer, then, is not invited to look at the history of the Soviet space launch through the perspective of the events’ participant. Instead, the camera is interested in the visual structure of the historical era it attempts to record, wherein the history of the space launch is inscribed as a structuring narrative. This pinpoints the place of the complex of the “dead cosmonauts” myths within post-Soviet culture’s attempts to come to terms with the Soviet past.

Lyubov’ Arkus observes that the film is “not about the era, but instead about its unconscious”⁵⁴. As *Paper Soldier* continues the post-Soviet examination of the Soviet ‘space mythologies’, the rocket carries Daniil not to the vast expanse of Cosmos but instead to a kind of nostalgically peaceful Soviet heaven. Daniil, too, becomes a dead cosmonaut, radically changing his plane of existence not in order to conquer outer space for the Communist State, but instead to stay forever in the Soviet past, signaling it to anyone watching. At one point in the film, Daniil reads from Aleksandr Blok’s 1910 poem, “The Demon”: ‘Yes, I will take you with me/And raise you up where/The earth seems like a star/And the star seems like earth’ (Blok 2001: 197). As the film displaces the Soviet past into this eerie space structured by ambivalence, it is possible to locate Arkus’s ‘unconscious of the era’ in outer space that is staged as a reverse side of the Soviet dreamscape. For post-Soviet film and fiction that engage the Soviet ‘space

⁵⁴ Lyubov’ Arkus, “Besplodnye usiliia liubvi k Otechestvu” (interview with Aleksei German). *Seans* 35-36 (2008) <<http://seance.ru/n/35-36/sborka-3536/umsoldat/>> Accessed October 12, 2010.

mythologies,' outer space becomes a kind of experiential metaphor for the Soviet past that encompasses the sublime and the mundane, pleasure and pain, pride and shame associated with this past in the cultural memory.

CONCLUSION

“То есть я просто-напросто хочу сказать, что Ленин был грибом. Грибом, более того, он был не только грибом, он был еще помимо всего радиоволной”.

Сергей Курёхин, «Ленин-гриб»

“That is, I just simply want to say that Lenin was a mushroom. A mushroom, yes; moreover, not only was he a mushroom; he was also a radiowave.”

Sergei Kurekhin, “Lenin Was a Mushroom”

On May 18, 1991, according to the TV host Sergei Sholokhov, a group of “old Bolsheviks” came to the [Leningrad] Regional [Party] Committee. Their only question was, “is this true?”¹ The “old Bolsheviks” reacted to the segment in the “Fifth Wheel” (*Piatoe koleso*), a Leningrad TV program, which aired the previous day. In the segment, Sholokhov interviewed Sergei Kurekhin, an avant-garde musician who, in a series of brilliant lapses of logic, convincingly argued at length that Lenin was a mushroom, and that his mushroom-ness directly led to the October Revolution of 1917. Though by the end of the broadcast neither the host nor his guest could contain their giggling, Sholokhov later noted that the theory Kurekhin and he had put forward “was an answer to many questions.”

Kurekhin’s way of theorizing the Soviet era is in line with the absurdist aesthetics of the time. Yet, behind the formally sacrilegious hypothesis that Lenin abused hallucinogenic mushrooms to the extent that he himself finally became one, there is explanatory pathos: by May 1991, the October Revolution looked *exactly* like an outcome of a hallucinatory delusion.

¹Dima Mishenin, “Tsennnye Bumagi: Sholokhov – klassik russkogo televideniia” (Mikhail Sholokhov’s interview to Krestyanka), in *Peremeny* (online, 2008), <http://www.peremeny.ru/column/view/873/>, accessed September 20, 2010.

Kurekhin's project does deconstruct Soviet history; yet, the aesthetics of the absurd, in a way, are an honest answer to a genuine question late-Soviet culture had about its beginnings. Even though the "old Bolsheviks" did not think Kurekhin's answer was a good one, they nonetheless took the trouble to double-check, and probably not only because of the blind belief in the infallibility of Soviet TV broadcasts. Kurekhin's answer was truthful, if not true: his theory rationalized and explained the irrational in the late-Soviet culture through staging this culture's irrational beginnings.

The absurdist, de(con)structive tactics that Russian cultural texts of the 1990s too-often employed to represent both the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present are the reason why, in the words of Eliot Borenstein, "in the first five years of the twenty-first century... the 1990s [became] the despised decade... [characterized by] persistent negativity and hostility...."² Contemporary Russian culture seemed to be relieved when the 1990s were over; studies of recent Russian culture like Borenstein's "point to a growing emphasis on order, structure and domestic harmony"³ in the cultural production.

This shift in the tactics of representation points not just to the stabilization of both sociopolitical discourses and everyday life in post-Soviet Russia in the 2000s. The cultural desire for order, structure and comfort that recent Russian culture comes to articulate is not only a reaction to the cynical aesthetic of the absurd and the bleak – such an aesthetic had always concealed this desire. We can then read the trends described by Borenstein as an eventuality of the semantic uncertainties of the 1990s, as an articulation of the ordering, structuring pathos that underlied post-Soviet de(con)structive cultural production of the 1990s. This articulation becomes possible because the search for a metaphor that would legitimize post-Soviet culture

² Borenstein 2008, 226.

³ Ibid., 238.

finally achieves a modicum of success in the context of Vladimir Putin's presidency.

For Borenstein, the 1990s condense into the figure of Russia's first President, Boris Yeltsin, the "flabby and weak...absent father."⁴ Against this absent father is juxtaposed the "manly man," Putin, who, Borenstein convincingly shows, comes to define the landscape of "recent [Russian popular] culture [that] is attempting to move beyond male insecurity (Yeltsin) to a manly grip on power (Putin) while... rejecting the violent excess and bleak cynicism of the previous decade in favor of domesticity, comfort, and the continuity of family ties."⁵ Putin, then, replaces Yeltsin the absent father, to legitimize and support the articulation of the desire for continuity in the cultural texts from the 2000s.

The post-Soviet is over, as Kevin Platt proclaims, arguing that whereas authoritative visions of [Russian] history and identity during the 1990s were predicated on the notion that 1991 marked a moment of radical social transformation... the "end of the post-Soviet" is the culmination of a gradual reemergence over the last decade or so [2000s] of a vision of political history and social identity based in continuities, at various historical depths, linking the Russian present with the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras.⁶

As the metaphor of historical rupture comes to be replaced by the metaphor of continuity, the "despised decade" of the 1990s thus might look like a gap in Russian cultural mythologies, marked by the absent father and an absent teleology, much like the 1920s must have looked like to the founding fathers of Socialist Realism who attempted to cover a gap of their own created by the semantic uncertainty of the Russian revolutionary art. Yet, Borenstein makes a revealing remark when he discusses Putin's rise to power and its symbolic implications. In a cheesy pop

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Borenstein 228.

⁶ Platt 2009

song, the girl singer, weary of her unreliable, drinking boyfriend (who in Borenstein's reading stands for Yeltsin) wants a new one, "someone like Putin," an ideal boyfriend. Borenstein points to the song's "unintended" wisdom: "the new president filled a perceived need not necessarily for Putin himself, but for someone like Putin."⁷ Post-Soviet Russian culture's desire for the stability of myth is thus satisfied: the father returns to cover over the metaphoric lack, but this father only does so because he hears the call coming from the historical gap of the 1990s. In a perverse reading, Putin is an exceptionally suitable national symbol, alliteratively very close Pushkin: "not Pushkin, but still," Putin was, in a way, the culmination of the fetishistic desire for the continuities of Russia's paternal mythologies outlined in this study. I consciously make this metaphor dangerously supple, as its malleability alludes to the multitude of implausible extrapolations and analogies in the texts I have discussed, in the texts that stretch and bend the continuum of Russian/Soviet mythologies, making it "work" for post-Soviet culture.

The very "Project Putin," as Borenstein calls it, is a culmination of the post-Soviet attempt to articulate the continuity of Russian cultural mythologies. The "cult of Putin" emerges not as a response to the 1990s' void of state ideology and cultural mythologies; rather, it emerges as a response to the attempts of the culture of the 1990s to assess, restructure and relaunch the Soviet myths about culture, identity and textuality.

In this way, though the *metaphors* that come to stand for the 1990s and 2000s in the historiography of Russia are opposites, the cultural *desires* that define these two decades are not. When, with the end of the Soviet era, Lenin ceases to be the grandfather of every Soviet child, he becomes a mushroom. This transformation certainly stages a break between the Soviet myth and its post-Soviet interpretation. Yet, Lenin cannot remain *just* a mushroom: he *has* to be a radiowave, too. As the 1990s appropriate the existing rhetorical and mythological structures that

⁷ Borenstein 227.

the Soviet Union left behind,⁸ the excess of meaning with which the figure of Lenin continues to be invested provides a structural link between the hyperboles of Soviet mythology and the post-Soviet mode(s) of organizing meaning.

To draw on Platt again, “revolution, transition, or transformation ... can only be metaphors that mask inevitable continuities of social organization, practical life, and everyday experience - basal linkages that persist through even the most radical moments of social change.”⁹ Russia’s most persistent continuity is the role of its culture in shaping public and political life; in Nancy Condee’s words, “Russia’s culture... has historically served... as historian and augur, cartulary and politician [in the] narration of public conscience.”¹⁰ Yet, linguistic and visual signs, bread and butter for the scholars of culture, are but a symptom of these linkages, which exist on the level of repeating patterns of culture, on the level of practices, habits and rites of everyday life. Condee has precisely these continuities in mind when she discusses the structures of representation and practices of production in post-Soviet cinema: Russia will not resolve its imperial legacy, she argues, because it is its imperial legacy.¹¹ In this argument, the “imperial trace” in recent Russian cinema (which Condee cautiously avoids calling post-Soviet) has to do not only, and not primarily, with the themes, images, and ideologies that the filmmakers construct and draw upon; it also has to do with the representational modes and tactics through which these themes, images, and ideologies are approached.

Russia’s [imperial] past, then, is not the lost object for the culture to ponder, mourn, and to be eventually reconciled with; instead, it is that part of the pondering subject which organizes and structures the very mode of exploration of Russia’s [imperial] past. It is, in a sense,

⁸ Condee 2009, 5.

⁹ Platt 2009.

¹⁰ Condee 2009, 20.

¹¹ Condee 2009, 47.

contemporary Russia's unconscious, a concealed structure that underlies the production and articulation of culture.

The unconscious is structured like language, Lacan reminds us, and the linguistic conception of time in the modern Russian language is prohibitive of attempts to place an event in time. The beginnings of the modern Russian state lie temptingly close to the historical moment when the linguistic conception of time changed imperceptibly in Russia, with the loss of Old Russian tenses which blurred the distinctions between the different "pasts" to emphasize the "how" of the event rather than the "when," the modality rather than the moment on the conceptual timeline. This is not to say that the Russian language is prohibitive of the writing of history – only that the history that emerges should be a history of representational modalities of culture.

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